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Nov. 1983
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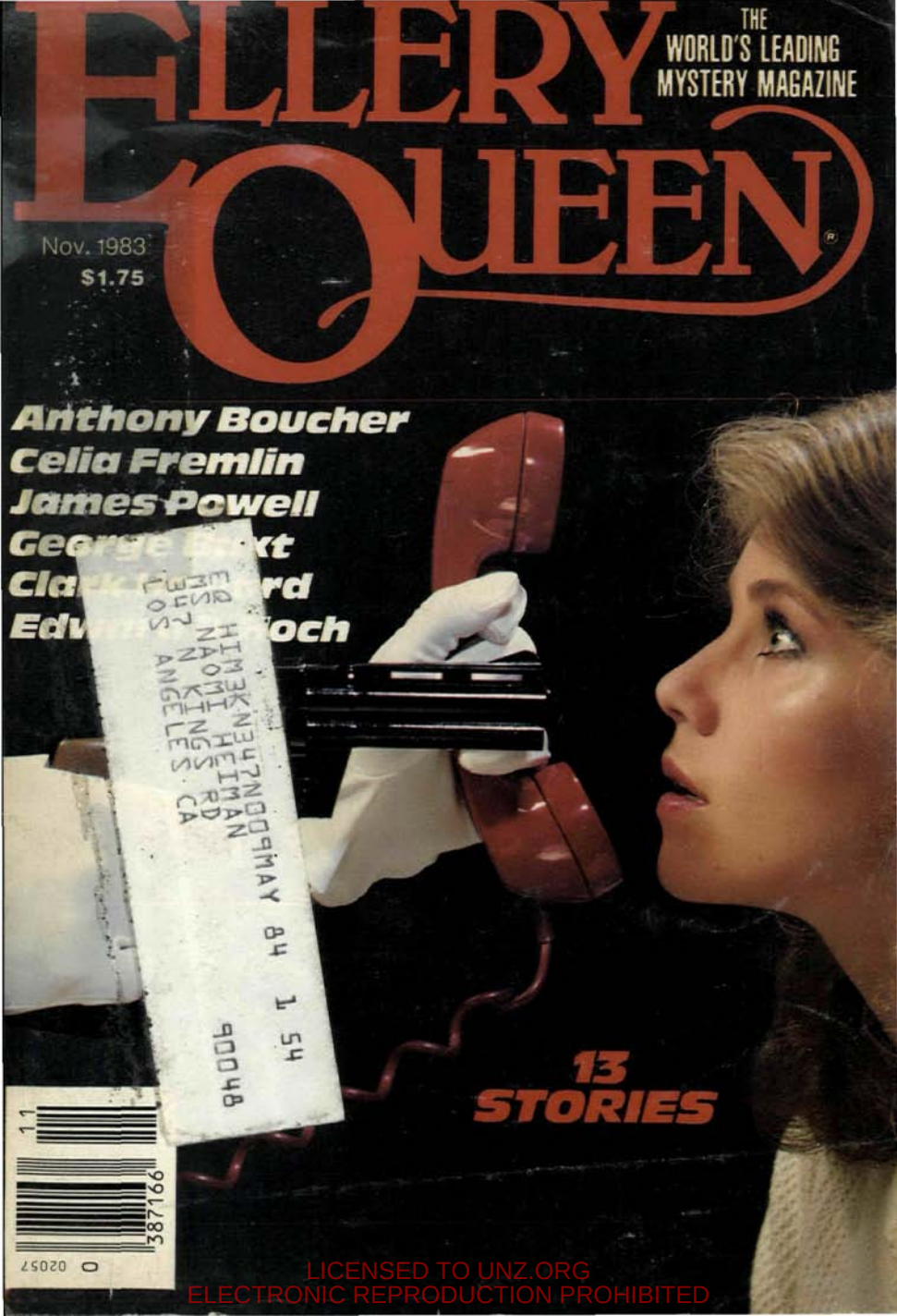

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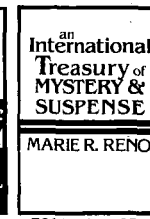

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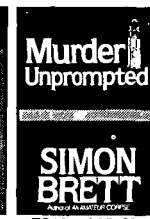

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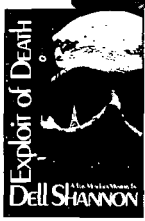

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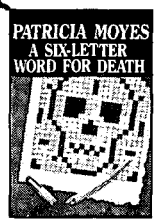

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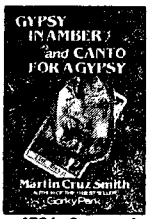

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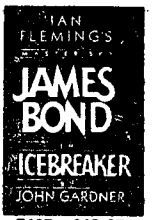

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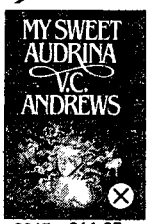

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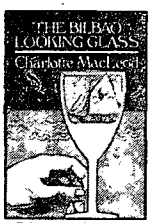

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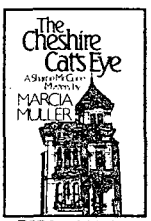

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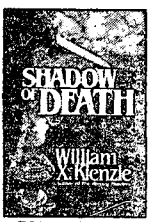

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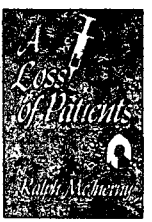

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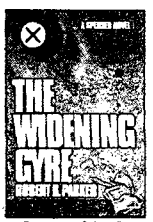

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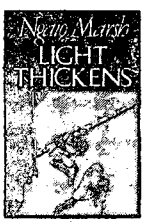

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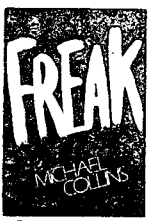

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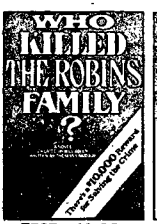

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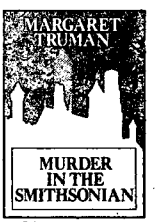

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

CELIA FREMLIN

Publishers Weekly *praised Celia Fremlin's latest novel,* The Parasite Person, *as "an absolutely masterful job." Anyone who has read any of Celia Fremlin's thirteen previous novels or her many short stories knows that exquisite control. Her characters are so deftly drawn, her fiction hardly seems like fiction at all . . .*

This summer—for the first time ever—Emmy would be free! Free to sit in her beloved garden, among the birds and the wallflowers and the roses, day after golden day, planning nothing, worrying about nothing, with no grim deadline looming, no fearsome departure date casting its black, lengthening shadow across the bright days . . .

THE SUMMER HOLIDAY

by CELIA FREMLIN

She would never have believed that widowhood would suit her so well. She would have said, if you'd asked her, that she was one of those unassuming, dependent little women who would be lost without a man to lean on.

And now here she was not feeling lost at all, not the least bit. It was amazing—and, in a way, rather disturbing.

Oh, she had mourned for Harold at the time, of course she had. She had cried bitterly at the funeral, and for quite a while afterwards, too, recalling tearfully all the nice things about him, like the square set of his shoulders and the way he would call out, "Emmy, I'm back!" as he came in at the front door. Silly, really, because how could he not be back if he was calling out? But somehow cozy, all the same, and—yes—she'd missed it.

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What had been rather awful, though—and it still made her feel guilty whenever she thought about it—was the number of things she *didn't* miss: the appalling number of small, everyday routines which were, quite simply, easier and pleasanter without him.

Lunch, for instance. She could have it on a tray now, just a cheese sandwich with perhaps a tomato, eaten in the sunshine under one of the windows, or with her feet up on the sofa, listening to *Woman's Hour*. Since his retirement, Harold had always expected a proper sit-down lunch at the dining-room table, rounded off by a proper pudding. Emmy herself didn't care for puddings, and though she'd never resented the extra trouble at the time it really was a relief, now, to know that she would never have to think about stewed apple—or suet, or custard, or hot jam sauce—ever again.

There were other unexpected little treats, too, incident on the solitary state. She hardly dared enumerate them, even in her own mind, so quickly had she found herself actually enjoying them, with Harold scarcely cold in his grave.

Reading in bed. Having the radio on while she dressed. Buying sliced bread. Leaving the crockery upside down on the draining-board all day instead of drying it and putting it away after every meal. All these things had irritated Harold, and so of course she'd mostly refrained from doing them—but, my goodness, what a relief it was now to relax her guard and do exactly as she liked! No "Emmy, dear, do you *have* to?" resounding in her ears ever again.

Ever again. Ever. Never. Words to wring the hearts of most widows, and bring tears to their eyes. It was awful how often, for Emmy, they brought instead a furtive little lift to her spirits, a tiny, guilt-ridden rejoicing at yet another small anxiety removed, another small burden laid to rest forever under the green grass and the faithfully tended flowers on Harold's grave.

Of all the small burdens—and indeed "small" was entirely the wrong word, because for Emmy it wasn't small at all—the burden of the Summer Holiday had been the most oppressive. The relief she'd felt—about two or three months after the funeral it must have been—when it had first dawned on her that there was now no reason at all why she should ever go on holiday again—ever!—was something she would remember, albeit guiltily, to the end of her days.

It had been April—Harold had died in February—and Emmy, drawn by the first real sunshine of the year, had dragged one of the deckchairs from its winter quarters and set it up on the lawn. And

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it was as she sat there, face upturned to the soft spring warmth, filled with a vague sense of newness, of dim, unexplored possibilities, that it occurred to her, quite suddenly and without warning, that *this* year she would be able to sit out on the lawn like this and enjoy the sunshine *every day,* all summer long! She didn't have to go on holiday at all!

The relief, the joy of it was breathtaking. Usually, by now—by mid-April—the shadow of the Holiday had already fallen. Already, Harold would be all of a fidget about visas, passports, hotel bookings, car-ferries, rolls of film, baggage regulations, Night Flights, Regular Flights, Cheap Flights, Tourist Flights, Standby Flights, Charter Flights—the lot. And naturally, as a good wife, it was her duty to fidget with him, not only about all these shared worries but also about those other, personal worries that were hers alone.

Her hair. To perm or not to perm—and if so, how soon? A couple of months ahead, to give it time to settle, or try to fit it somehow into that final frantic week so that there should be no risk that it might grow out?

And clothes. Holiday clothes were a nightmare all on their own at her age. Every year it was the same: every garment she possessed was too dressy, too dowdy, or made her look like mutton-dressed-as-lamb. And so, year after year, with gritted teeth and sinking heart, off she would drag herself to the West End, in and out of the lordly great shops, where under the withering eye of some flawlessly enameled assistant everything she tried on was either too dressy, too dowdy, or made her look like mutton-dressed-as-lamb.

And so it went on, one dreadful problem after another, all through May and June—the loveliest months of the year spoiled and darkened by these mounting preparations, these ever-escalating anxieties from which there could be no escape, no reprieve, unstoppable save by one thing only—the arrival of the dreaded Day.

The terror lest the minicab they'd ordered wouldn't turn up. Or that it would take them to the wrong terminal. Suppose their luggage didn't get put on the plane. Suppose they arrived too late! That fear of arriving too late always haunted her dreams for days and weeks beforehand. Then there was the fear that the plane, once they were finally on it, would fail to take off—that there would be something wrong with it. Or that it *would* take off and that there would be an air-crash. Or sometimes, in her final desperation, that there wouldn't.

Had Harold himself really enjoyed it all? She'd never known,

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because she'd never asked him, any more than he'd ever asked her. A Summer Holiday was something you simply *had* every year, like Christmas or an attack of 'flu. You never thought of questioning it.

On the other hand, though, maybe Harold *had* actually enjoyed it. Certainly he'd enjoyed showing his slides the following winter. —But at the time? Mostly, he'd seemed bored: no doubt that was why he kept booking them onto those awful coach-trips to somewhere or other to look at something and to have a cup of tea which you couldn't enjoy for fear that there mightn't be a Ladies on the way back.

But this summer—for the first time ever—it didn't have to happen! She would be free! Free to sit in her beloved garden, among the birds and the wallflowers and the roses, day after golden day, planning nothing, worrying about nothing, with no grim deadline looming, no fearsome departure date casting its black, lengthening shadow across the bright days. For the first time in all her adult life she could spend the whole long summer as she had always yearned to spend it, tending her flowers, watering them, and sharing with each one its moment of glory as the season waxed and waned. This year, she would miss nothing, not the delphiniums, not the peonies, not the dahlias' scarlet and mauve and gold. She would be here to pick the strawberries as they ripened, and the blackcurrants; she would be here to harvest the lavender, to gather for wine the great white elder-flowers, big as dinner plates, at the very peak of their perfection.

It was barely three weeks later when the blow fell.

"You must have a holiday, Mother," her daughter-in-law Vivien announced one Sunday lunchtime. "Geoff and I have been talking about it, haven't we, Geoff, and we've decided that you must come with us this year. No, Mother, don't argue, Geoff can afford it easily, he feels it's the least he can do—after all, he *is* your only son. A holiday is just what you need after this dreadful winter you've had."

"But—but, Vivien dear, I don't really—!"

"Mother! I said, don't *argue!* We won't take no for an answer, will we, Geoff? You *must* have a holiday. Harold would have wished it—you know he would!"

Would he? Would he? And even if he would, did she have to go *on* doing the things that Harold wished now that he was dead and

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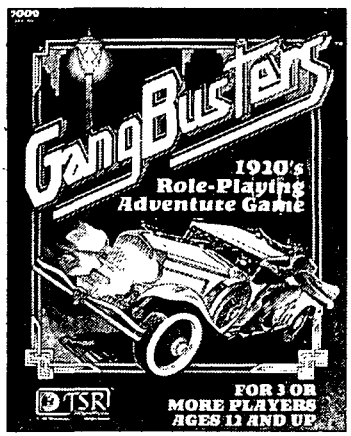

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gone? She'd done the things he'd wished for the best part of thirty years—wasn't that enough?

Feebly, she tried to fight back.

"It's sweet of you, dears," she said, putting her knife and fork carefully together, "I really am very grateful—it's such a kind thought—but, you see, the thing is—"

Well, what was it? Rack her brain as she might, Emmy could think of absolutely nothing. Simply to say, "I hate holidays, I alway have, and I've resolved never to go on another one as long as I live," was, of course, out of the question. People don't hate holidays. It's just not done.

"Mummy, why isn't Grandma finishing her chicken?" interposed seven-year-old Angie, whose sharp, beady eyes had been noting every nuance of her grandmother's discomfiture. "Grandma, why aren't you finishing your chicken?"

"Hush, dear," remonstrated Vivien, but there was no real reproof behind it. Vivien secretly relished, Emmy was sure, Angie's talent for spotting small flaws and inadequacies in her grandmother's menage and calling attention to them. It had become almost a family sport, at Emmy's expense.

"Why are Grandma's forks all yellowy instead of bright?" she'd asked earlier in the meal. And before that, wandering into the room where the three grownups were drinking sherry: "What are all those dead flies for, Grandma, on the window ledge in the spare room?"

It would be like that all through the holiday. "Mummy, why is Grandma wearing those funny shoes to the beach?" "Mummy, why is Grandma going to the toilet again? She's only just been."

Emmy forced herself to swallow another few mouthfuls of chicken—but the taste of defeat was everywhere. She was cornered, and she knew it. It was all *arranged,* you see, the hotel bookings, the air ticket, everything. They'd meant it as a *surprise,* a lovely surprise.

"Oh, *please,* Mother, stop being so difficult! What do you think people would *say* if we all went off on holiday without you at a time like this? Oh, Mother, don't be so *tiresome! Of course* you need a holiday!"

Of course—
Of course—
Of course—

By the end of the afternoon, everything was settled. At one point,

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looking out into her tranquil, sunlit garden, her joy in it already spoiled for weeks and months ahead, actual tears came into Emmy's eyes and she had to blink them away quickly before Angie could ask in her sharp, shrill little voice, "Mummy, why is Granny crying?"

Not that it would have mattered. They'd merely have thought she was crying for Harold, as a proper widow should, and that's what they'd have told Angie.

"She's crying for poor Grandpa," they'd have said, in suitably hushed tones, and would then have changed the subject quickly before Angie could pipe: "Why is she?"

She didn't cry for long. The idea came to her quite suddenly only a few days after the visit—but of course to start with she had to keep it to herself, hugging the relief and the joy of it close to her breast, secretly, while answering appropriately and with pretended enthusiasm the kindly remarks of friends and neighbors.

"Beginning to get excited about your holiday, I'll bet," said one. And another: "It'll do you a world of good! A real holiday is just what you need!"

And Emmy smiled to them all, and nodded, and went on watering her young tomato plants, almost bursting with the secret joy of knowing that, after all, on July eleventh she *wouldn't* be leaving them, just when the first thrilling green fruits were beginning to swell in the sunshine.

It was on July ninth that the plan had to be put into action. Geoff had brought over her air-ticket several days earlier, all tucked neatly into a crisp blue folder, together with lots of travellers' cheques and brochures and things, and she had put it all carefully away with her passports, in the top left-hand drawer of the bureau. Now, as the afternoon of the ninth waned towards evening, she took the documents out, passport and all, wrapped them in a plastic bag, and took them into the kitchen, the door of which opened straight into the garden. Already, earlier in the day, she'd dug the hole—on the far side of the lavender-bush where it wouldn't show—and presently, after sunset and before the moon rose, she slipped out into the sweet, scented garden and popped the package into its little grave, tamping the earth well down above it.

Then she returned to the kitchen, brushing loose soil from her hands, her heart thumping with such a mixture of excitement, trepidation, and triumph as she had never known . . .

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"But Mother, how *can* you have lost them?" shrieked Vivien down the phone. "I don't understand—what did you take them to the Post Office *for?* Oh, God, I'd better ring them at once! Let's pray that someone responsible has found them and handed them in!"

But the Post Office hadn't got them, and nor had the bank or the supermarket or the Cosy Coffee House or any of the other places where it occurred to Vivien that her idiotic mother-in-law might have left them.

"Whatever did you take them out *for?"* she kept asking, distracted, in between the fruitless phone-calls—and she treated with the scorn it deserved her mother-in-law's wavering account of having transferred them to her handbag "so as not to forget them in the last-minute rush." How neurotic could the woman get?

"I suppose, if they're *not* found," Emmy ventured at last, making every effort to keep the jubilation out of her voice, "if they're *not* found, I won't be able to go, will I? Not without my passport or anything—"

"Oh, nonsense!" But Vivien was clearly rattled. She'd been around here all afternoon, with Angie at her heels, searching the house in every cranny without, of course, any success. Naturally, it never occurred to her to look in the garden, and so Emmy wasn't really worried.

All the same, there was one bad moment.

"Mummy, why hasn't Grandma packed any of her summer dresses? Why has she only—?"

Emmy's heart very nearly stopped. Naturally, knowing that she would be happily unpacking everything again tomorrow, she'd just shoved in any old thing, just to make the case look full.

"Mummy, come and look. Grandma's forgotten to put in her—"

Gasping for breath, Emmy raced upstairs faster than she'd done for years, slammed down the lids of the cases and locked them.

"And don't you dare touch them!" she cried to the attentive Angie. "Just you leave them alone!"

"Mummy, why is Grandma being so cross?"

But it was all right. It blew over. Vivien was far too busy, far too distraught, to follow it up.

"I'll just have to ring the police again," she said, pushing the hair back from her damp forehead. "Maybe someone's—no." She drew her hand back from the telephone. "No, I think I'd better go round and talk to them in person."

And off she went, leaving Emmy victorious—but somehow uneasy.

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The *police!* The documents wouldn't have been handed in, obviously—they couldn't have been—and surely no one would ever think of digging up the garden, but all the same—the police!

Her unease was justified. It was less than two hours later—barely nine o'clock—when Vivien rang up, and Emmy knew at once, from her ecstatic tone, that something terrible had happened.

"It's all right!" Vivien exulted. "No—they haven't found anything, but they've been *so* kind! People talk about 'faceless bureaucrats' and all that, but they're not like that at all—not when you talk to them personally. I told them all about your sad bereavement, and how you'd been looking forward so much to this special holiday, and they were *so* sympathetic, all of them—the police, the Airline, the passport people, everybody! They've rushed through an emergency passport for you—and a duplicate air ticket! All you've got to do is sign a few things. I'm coming to fetch you right away."

They had indeed been kind, all these officials. The thought of this poor lonely widow missing her longed-for holiday had really touched their hearts, and between them they'd fixed everything. Emmy felt awful, in a way, that all this kindness was going to be wasted; for she knew already what she was going to do.

Vivien drove her home, watched while she put the new documents into her handbag, and the handbag into the top left bureau drawer, watched while she locked it.

"And don't *touch* them, Mother, don't touch them *at all* until we come for you tomorrow morning," was her parting injunction; and Emmy nodded meekly, submissive as a little child.

This new lot she buried under the lilac, tamping down the soil well and thoroughly as before. And then, when it was midnight, she set to work to make the house ready.

She had always heard that burglars are in the habit of turning the place upside-down in their search for valuables, pulling books out of shelves, dragging furniture about, tipping drawers out all over the floor. She didn't want to make *too* much mess, of course, because who but she would have the job of clearing it up again? So she set about her task circumspectly, upending only those drawers which were in a mess anyway and could do with a good tidy, and pushing around only such articles of furniture as she could shift easily, such as the standard-lamps, the cane-bottomed chairs, and

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the spindly little telephone table on the upstairs landing, which she laid neatly on its side.

She took special care with the books—she had heard that burglars always go for these first, in case there are banknotes hidden between the pages. One by one, she took them off the shelves and set them gently, not to damage the bindings, all over the sitting-room floor, some open, some shut, to look as if they might have been thrown there. It was past two when she dragged herself, exhausted but triumphant, up to bed.

Tired though she was, she didn't fall asleep at once, but lay, tense and jubilant, savoring the triumph that awaited her tomorrow morning. They *couldn't* make her go now, not with this second lot of papers lost, and the house freshly burgled. A vast contentment and joy slowly filled her consciousness. But just as she was falling into a blissful sleep, a sudden thought struck her, jerking her wide awake.

Nothing had been stolen, except the papers! So preoccupied had she been with making the house *look* burgled that she'd quite forgotten that *real* burglars would take all the valuables they could lay their hands on. That's what they'd have come for.

Only small things, of course, that could be easily buried. The silver teaspoons? Money from her handbag? Jewelry from her inlaid sandalwood box? Scrambling out of bed, and remembering just in time not to switch on the light lest a neighbor might notice, she hurried across the room and out onto the dark landing—where she tripped over the spindly little telephone table lying on its side in the middle of the floor and pitched headlong down the stairs.

It was the murder hunt of the century. Naturally, the police recognized within seconds that the burglary had been faked, and suspicion fell, briefly, on Vivien, who had spent the whole of the previous afternoon alone with her mother-in-law. But the times didn't fit, the motive was negligible (a few hundred pounds of insurance money), and so this theory was soon dropped.

It was when the first of the buried passports was found that the excitement began; and when the second, duplicate one also came to light, the excitement became a furor, making front-page headlines in all the newspapers and receiving star treatment on television. Clearly, this was no ordinary domestic fracas—there must be large-scale ramifications. Russian spies? An international drug-ring? Some sinister terrorist organization? Something, anyway, that de-

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manded a false identity, a stolen passport, for someone crossing a frontier with some nefarious purpose. Some deceptively innocent-looking middle-aged woman, vaguely resembling Emmy, would have to be sought. No doubt it was this unlucky resemblance that had led to poor Emmy's death. Or maybe the poor lady had stumbled in all innocence on some piece of information that was a danger to the malefactors. Anyway, *some* kind of international criminal network it must be. Interpol was called in, and the C.I.D.—even M.I.5—but with all their combined expertise, they seemed quite unable to come up with any plausible theory as to what lay behind it all.

Angie, of course, could have told them. Indeed she did.

"Grandma lost her passport on purpose," she bossily announced. "She was only pretend-looking for it, I know she was. I watched her. And she'd only pretend-packed, too. I looked. You see, Grandma hated holidays. And—" she appended belligerently, just for the devilment of it—"*I* hate holidays, too. They're boring."

"Hush, dear, don't be rude," Vivien reproved absently, and returned to the serious matter of being interviewed by the C.I.D. Naturally, no one took any notice of this little bit of family bickering. Why should they? How could they be expected to guess that a cheeky little seven-year-old showoff might have come up with the correct solution to a mystery which for weeks now had been baffling the best brains of the best crime-detection squads in all the western world?

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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

"It might be beyond the strength of both of you," Uncle Abner told the preachers. "Let me try something different."

Adam Bird looked at him in wonder. "Have you cast out devils, Abner? Remember, it could fall on you and overcome you, even as the seven sons of Sceva were overcome."

"The risk is mine," Uncle Abner replied . . .

THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT

by JOHN F. SUTER

James Blackburn had been slain for a little while before my Uncle Abner returned from a nine-day absence.

In the yard before our house was a large sandstone block to assist in mounting horses. I was sitting on it in the pale morning sun of early November, listening to the tumultuous chatter coming from the trees several hundred feet down the road. A vast flock of starlings, bound south, had just settled in the branches. There were hundreds of the noisy things, perhaps as many as a thousand.

Suddenly there was a sound of pounding hoofs on the road, and the birds rose to the sky like a vast black fabric caught in a rising wind. Hard on their taking wing came a wagon drawn by a pair of grays driven by a big, lean man in gray.

The driver gave me no hail. I could see little of him, for his head was down, the broad brim of his flat crowned hat flopping as he passed. Although it had not rained for several days, I glimpsed great spatters of dried mud on his cape and his hat.

Just as he passed, he raised his head and I caught sight of wildly staring eyes and a mouth gaping in a tangled black beard. I was rigid with astonishment. I had recognized the team and suspected

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from the driver's figure that he was Luke Chapman, but the face was so contorted that I thought I must be mistaken.

Then the team was gone and the birds began to settle. They had scarcely put their feet down when they rose again. From the direction the wagon had come, a buggy drawn by a red roan was approaching at a brisk pace. Its driver was the old Calvinist preacher, Bronson. From the opposite direction rode my Uncle Abner on his great chestnut. They had met in front of our house. Both men reined to a halt.

"Good morning, Bronson," Abner called. "Chapman drives as though he were pursued by a fiend. I did not expect to find you behind him."

"Fiend there may be," the old man replied, "but it is within, not behind, him. Or so he says."

I saw my uncle's head come up in interest.

"Indeed," he said in wonderment. "Why does he say that? Do you agree with him?"

The old man shifted on his seat. He regarded Abner from beneath bushy white eyebrows. His voice was harsh when he answered.

"Has nobody told you?"

"Nobody has told me anything," my uncle said. "I have been gone to Ohio for nine days, and I only returned last night."

A small breeze ruffled Bronson's thick shock of white hair. "Many days ago, Chapman began to act strangely. When he met anyone, no matter who or where, he shrieked and cursed at them. He grew unkempt, and his clothes became stained and mud-spotted. His beard was flecked with spittle. His speech was incoherent and filthy."

Abner frowned. "Has he taken to drinking heavily?"

Bronson shook his head. "No, and I must be on my way. I met him on the road but a short while ago, driving as you saw him. He pulled to a halt, laughing wildly, and shrieked, 'Do you know I have just killed Blackburn? I'm going to bring him in! Give me a reason, and I'll kill you, too!' "

Abner's eyes widened. "James Blackburn?"

"I suppose," the preacher answered. "When he had said that, he beckoned me closer and said in a calmer tone, 'You know me, Bronson. I wouldn't harm you, but *he* would. He did this, not—' Then he drove away, slapping the reins in a frenzy."

"There has been bad blood between Chapman and Blackburn," my uncle said. "Who is *'he'?"*

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The old preacher stiffened. "The unclean spirit that possesses Chapman. Who else could it be?" He stirred restlessly. "I must be after him to see—"

Uncle Abner had noticed me, I knew, but he now acknowledged me for the first time. "Martin," he called, "you might be useful! Bronson, let the boy go with you. I can accompany you, as well. Who can say what Chapman intends?"

As I climbed in beside the old preacher, I reflected that my mother would have opposed my going. Yet, I had once faced Dix, a murderer, and in the company of my uncle and the commanding old preacher I had no fear.

"Have you ever met with an unclean spirit before?" I asked the old man as we went along.

"Never," he admitted. "I have followed the trail of the devil many times, but this is the first of his creatures I have actually met."

"What are you going to do?" I queried.

"I intend to cast him out," he replied.

I might have pursued this further, but Uncle Abner, riding close beside us, had heard the questions.

"Bronson," he called, "you say that Chapman—or this thing which controls him—spoke of killing Blackburn?"

"He did."

Abner reflected. "That is strange. You know Blackburn as well as I do. Would you think a devil's minion would destroy a follower of his own master?"

"There is guile of the serpent here," the old man replied. "The answer is yet to be seen."

At this, Uncle Abner nodded and rode on ahead.

As we followed at a slower pace, I continued to question Bronson.

"My uncle says that Chapman and Blackburn don't like each other," I said. "What is the reason?"

"The trouble comes from Blackburn's father," the preacher replied. "In his last years he was nothing like his former self, and he swore that his neighbors had robbed him of some of his land. In his mind, the Chapmans and the Tylers were those who had done the thing."

"Was any of this true?" I asked.

"Not even his son, James, thought that it was."

"He might have been trying to get more land," I ventured.

"So it was thought," the old preacher agreed. "He never got an extra foot. The only person he ever convinced was his son James.

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It is said that the old man made his son give him a deathbed promise to take back the land."

I had never heard of this. Bronson saw my surprise and went on, "For a long time after his father's death, James Blackburn did nothing. Then, over the last two years, he began to move against Chapman and Tyler."

"What did they do when he accused them of being on his family's land?"

"He made no accusations. He cut the trees that marked the boundaries and put snake fences inside land they thought was theirs."

I was about to inquire about action by the law when Uncle Abner came riding back to us.

"He was seen driving on the road to Scout's Rock!" he called when he came up to us. Then he turned and rode on ahead again.

Scout's Rock was a stony outcrop overlooking the river. It thrust up from a dense patch of woods and ended in a sharp cliff on the upriver side. At the foot of the cliff, a small ravine led between two hills to the river. On the hill opposite Scout's Rock, at a lower level, was a smaller, unnamed cliff. Paths went through the ravine to the river and up through the weeds and brush to each of the cliffs.

On the road at the end of this ravine we came upon Chapman's team, tethered to a sapling. Nearby was Abner's great horse. Nobody was in sight, but voices could be heard, coming closer. The conversation was punctuated with wild laughter.

At last three men came slowly along the path. Two of them were big men—Chapman and my uncle—carrying the body of a third big man. A smaller gray-faced man with a permanently cowed look followed slowly behind them.

There was no mistaking that the man they carried was dead. No live person's neck lolled at such an angle.

Chapman was carrying the man's arms and addressing Abner, who had the feet.

"Yes, I killed him," he was saying. "How many times must I tell you I did, Abner?" He gave a peal of wild laughter. When it subsided, he said, "I cast him down from a great height—I did, I did! You saw it happen, Tyler. I did it, didn't I?"

"I saw it happen," the small man said in a low voice.

"I found you trying to move his body from the rocks where it hit," Abner said. "It appears that he fell from the cliff. Did you pick him up and throw him over? Did you push him?" He spoke over his shoulder to Tyler. "Did you see either of these things happen?"

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"He did not!" Chapman yelled. "I did neither of those! *I*—have greater power! I have only to level my finger and strike a man down—any man! That is what I did to Blackburn! I struck him down and he fell!"

Abner's tone became less demanding. "Let's get him into the wagon and lay him down. Then we can look at him better."

Bronson stepped down from his buggy. "I have a duty to perform." He was looking at Chapman.

"Later," said Abner. "The one you want will not hurry away."

Chapman's laugh became more of a chuckle. My spine grew cold from my neck to my hips.

Together, Chapman and my uncle laid Blackburn's body in the back of Chapman's wagon. I looked on in curiosity. I had no fear of Blackburn; the man could not harm me. Abner straightened his limbs and studied him. He was a big man, with thick brown hair. The tip of his nose had a pronounced upturn, and his upper teeth protruded slightly. His staring eyes were dark brown. As I watched, Abner gently closed the eyelids.

"There is nothing to see but the fact of his death," my uncle remarked. "Before he came here, he had been at his pigsty. My hands tell me that." He wrinkled his nose.

He stopped to pull a handful of the wildgrass at the side of the road and wiped his hands. "Only his boots are stained," he said. He gestured toward the man's heavy, gray-wool trousers. "See how clean his trousers are and how untorn. No branches or bushes broke his fall from the rock."

He looked at Chapman. "Where did you direct this power of yours? At his head? At his heart?"

Chapman laughed again. "At his head? Hardly. There was nothing in it. At his heart!"

Uncle Abner opened the man's coat and shirt, then his underwear, and looked at the skin. "He is unmarked," he commented.

"Of course," the demented man cackled. "You do not know the limits of my power."

Abner turned to the small man. "Tyler, did you see this happen as Chapman claims?"

The gray-faced man was already wearing a heavy woolen cap. He pulled nervously at it with grimy fingers. "Yes, I did, Abner. I was up on that other rock and I looked acrost and there was Blackburn—"

"What were you doing there?"

"I was comin' back from stayin' overnight with my cousin Walter

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when I noticed Blackburn headin' into the woods. I wanted to talk to him about his fences. I was too far back to see which way he went, so I took a guess. It was the wrong path."

"You saw him on the rock," my uncle prompted. "What was he doing?"

"Why—jest standin' there. Then, all the sudden, he staggered like he'd been hit. Next thing, he'd fell over the cliff."

"Where was Chapman when this happened?"

"He was nowhere in sight. Then, jes' when Blackburn fell, he showed up at the very back of the rock, maybe ten–fifteen feet away."

"Could he have pushed Blackburn in any way? Hit him with a rock?" Abner questioned.

The small man shook his head. "I don't see how he could have pushed. And I didn't hear anythin' hit."

Uncle Abner turned to Chapman. "You are going to bring the body in? Where?"

Chapman's eyes gleamed, and he grinned, but he did not laugh. "To Thaxton."

My uncle was surprised. "The sheriff?"

"Why not? Isn't he good enough for you?"

Chapman's question was indeed pointed. Thaxton's predecessor had been a thief, and Abner had exposed him.

"I am not one to judge him. I believe he is a good man," Abner replied. "However, you or the thing speaking through you has a fine regard for the law. Strange that an unclean spirit should be a contrite one."

His only reply was another grin.

Uncle Abner spoke to the small man. "You will go with him, Tyler?"

"Yes. He wants a witness. I'll jes' follow along on my horse." He indicated a bay mare tethered farther along the road.

"Start, then," Abner said. "I have something to say to my nephew before I come."

When the wagon began to move, my uncle came over to us. "Bronson," he said, "be patient until Martin does something I want him to do. Then bring him to the sheriff's office."

"Now Martin," he went on, "I want you to listen carefully and do exactly what I ask. When it is done, you will come in with Bronson."

Perhaps half an hour later, Bronson stopped the buggy in front

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of the courthouse. The building's white-plaster pillars were subdued in the pale sunlight.

The old preacher and I went around the building to the rear. After Smallwood's rascality, it was decided to put the sheriff's office in a public place instead of his own house. It was there where the new man, Thaxton, might be found.

I knew that the others were still here, for Chapman's wagon and Abner's chestnut were behind the building. The body was still in the wagon, but someone had thrown a cloth over it.

There was a hubbub of voices coming from the small office as we approached. Then I heard Tyler speak.

"I can only tell you what I saw. I was on the other side of the ravine. I had no part in it!"

"But—" said a voice not yet familiar to me. It was Thaxton, as I learned.

"You can hardly be faulted, Thaxton," I heard Uncle Abner say. "You are being asked to believe that Chapman has confessed to murder—but that a creature from Hell, hiding within him, is the real killer."

"You put it clearly, Abner," Thaxton answered.

Bronson put his blue-veined hand on the latch and opened the door. There behind a battered oak table sat a blocky man with spiky black hair and a short, wiry beard. His slate-gray eyes glanced in our direction. So did the eyes of everyone else standing in the crowded little room.

A look of surprise crossed Bronson's face, and one must have been on mine, too. Among those standing around Thaxton was Adam Bird, the other circuit-riding preacher, a Methodist.

Neither Bronson nor Adam Bird was a young man. Bronson was the older. Each of them regarded his calling with utmost seriousness. Neither would have compromised with the Devil. Yet they were not alike. Bronson attempted to appeal first of all to reason, assuring his listeners that their destiny lay in the ways of the Lord. His dogma was called upon when he mounted any crusade against wickedness. Adam Bird, on the other hand, was more practical and adaptable. He chose to strike deep for the emotions. His favorite tactic was an attempt to overwhelm his opponent. When Bronson saw him, he ignored everyone else in the room.

"What do *you* here, Adam?" he inquired, with a side glance at Chapman.

"I came to ask Thaxton to let me see Howard, who is his prisoner

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for drunkenness," Adam Bird replied. "It seems that I have walked into something that concerns us both."

"I have my intentions to deal with it," Bronson said.

"I have never doubted your competence," Adam Bird assured him. "I do offer my help. Have you ever faced an enemy such as this one?"

"No, but I have no fear. Did the Lord not assure the children of Israel, through Moses, *I will be an enemy unto thine enemies?"*

Uncle Abner was listening to the two old men. Without drawing attention, he stepped to Thaxton's side and bent over.

"There is nothing in this for you, Thaxton," he said in a low tone. "Let us go outside for a moment."

The sheriff got up quietly and squeezed to the door. Abner followed, motioning to me to accompany them. None of the others came after us.

"Thaxton," said Abner, when the door had closed, "let us look at Blackburn again."

He walked to the wagon and threw back the cloth which covered the body.

I had seen enough of Blackburn. I leaned against the nearest hitching post and stooped to pull some of the beggar-lice from my trousers. I had gathered a generous collection when I was carrying out my uncle's errand at the cliffs. Even though the twin prickles of these small tapering brown seed cases were not painful, they were a nuisance.

At Uncle Abner's suggestion, Thaxton was peering at the body.

"Look at his neck," my uncle was saying, lifting the shoulders gently.

Thaxton bent over. "Splinters. He must have fallen on a branch."

Abner lowered the body. "Splinters, indeed. Now, look at him well."

The sheriff studied slowly and carefully, then shook his head. "I must be blind, Abner. I fail to see what you mean."

"You will see it," Uncle Abner said. He looked over at me. "Leave that for later, Martin, and come over here."

I obeyed, but stole a glance at Blackburn. I saw nothing I had not seen before.

"Thaxton," Abner said. "This is my nephew, Martin. Observe him. Tell me what you think of him."

I was all of thirteen, and I had always had my uncle's affection

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and trust, but this was the first time I had known him to show pride in me.

The sheriff looked at me. "A fine lad. I can see you've been in the woods. Did they call you away from inspecting your rabbit snares, Martin?"

Before I could answer, Uncle Abner intervened. "I had set him on a different game trail."

The sheriff was interested. "Indeed. Did you have any luck, boy?"

My reply was cut off again. The door of the office opened and the four other men came out. Bronson strode over to us, his deep-set eyes gleaming.

"Thaxton," he said in a commanding tone, "this man has turned himself in as a murderer. You can arrest him, but you surely would be arresting an innocent man. He was merely the helpless tool of the creature possessing him. You know this as well as I."

The sheriff gave back his stare. "How can I turn him loose? I hear that he even threatened to kill you."

Bronson quivered with indignation. "There is a place for the mad, but it is not the gallows. Would you have him die and be carried off by a fiend?"

"No," the sheriff conceded, "but the law insists that I arrest him."

"That is unnecessary," Bronson argued. "I shall drive this thing from him. Then let us see."

Thaxton shrugged. "It could do no harm."

Bronson dipped his head in acknowledgment and walked back to the group. He grasped Chapman by the arm and drew him well out into the yard away from everyone else. To my surprise, the demented man grinned but offered no resistance.

Bronson faced him. "You—*that other*—what is your name?"

Chapman, still with the idiotic look on his face, shook his head. He spoke no word.

Bronson took a small Testament from his pocket and held it in his left hand. He reached into his coat and drew out a small wooden cross. He faced Chapman with the book and the cross.

"Know that our Lord, when He had risen, bestowed the power to cast out unclean spirits upon anyone who believed and involved His name," the old preacher said in a steady voice. "Therefore, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you who possess the body of this mortal, Luke Chapman, to come forth."

Nothing happened. Chapman stood like a wooden image.

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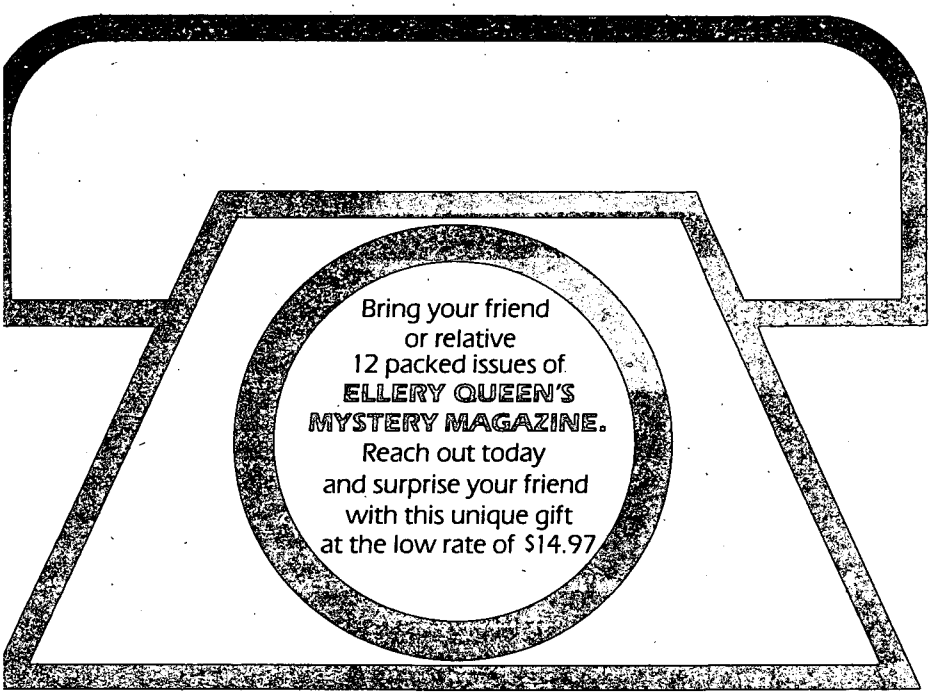

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"Do you hear me?" Bronson demanded, his voice louder. He thrust the cross before Chapman's staring eyes. *"Come forth!"*

This command, as had the first, produced no result.

Bronson stood still. It was plain from his face that he was uncertain as to how to proceed next. He looked to the sky and his lips moved silently. He lowered his head and avoided looking at us.

Then old Adam Bird stepped forward. He was big and arresting, and it was plain that nothing would stay him. He was like a prophet of old, even to the mark the land left on him, the dried mud on his boots.

At first, his approach was mild.

"Bronson," he said, laying his hand on the other preacher's arm, "do not be downcast. We are brethern, as our Lord said.

"Why," he went on, "nowhere is it written how you or I should do what must be the right thing. But you failed to complete the matter."

"Where did I fail?" asked Bronson.

"You gave him no place to go."

Bronson straightened, but Adam Bird tightened his grip on his arm.

"This might be dangerous," he said. "Let me do it."

He took the book and the cross from Bronson and turned to Chapman. He let go Bronson's arm and gripped Chapman's.

With no resistance from Chapman, Bird led him to one of the grays in Chapman's team.

"Now," the preacher said, "you thing of Satan, whoever you are, I offer you this beast as a refuge. Will you accept?"

His answer was a high-key titter from Chapman.

"Is that agreement?" Bird asked. "It may be. Let us see."

He uttered the same command in the name of the Lord that Bronson had. "Now begone to this beast!" he said in conclusion.

The animal stood unmoved, its attitude unchanged.

Chapman laughed a short, discordant laugh.

The preacher glared. He shook Chapman's arm fiercely.

"I fear no devil!" he shouted. "I would offer myself as a prize for you to take, if you could. But I know that if you failed, you might even take that innocent boy before we could prevent it. *But know this*—I intend to stand before you and command you until you come forth and enter this beast!"

A guttural chuckle came from Chapman, but the horse remained placid.

The old preacher stood in helpless fury.

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Then, as he gathered himself for another attempt, Uncle Abner stepped forward.

"It might be beyond the strength of both of you," he said. "Let me try something different."

Adam Bird looked at him in wonder.

"Have you cast out devils, Abner? Remember, it could fall on you and overcome you, even as the seven sons of Sceva were overcome."

"I think that might not happen," Abner replied. "However, the risk is mine."

Adam Bird stood back, and Uncle Abner beckoned to Chapman. "Come with me."

"Here," Thaxton retorted. "This man is in my care. You can't take him away."

"Consider me your deputy, then," my uncle answered. "Trust me. He will be returned."

Misgiving was plain on Thaxton's face, but he subsided. He watched as Abner pointed a direction and Chapman walked to his bidding. I had not been told to remain, and I followed. The two preachers took a few steps, but a wave of Abner's other hand stayed them.

We walked from the rear of the courthouse, then continued straight on, along another road. I knew that Uncle Abner would not go far. I felt that he wanted an end to this business.

I was right. We had gone only a few hundred yards when we came to a modest, two-story frame house painted white. I knew the house. It belonged to Doctor Storm.

We knew that Storm was there, for his horse was tethered near the house. He responded quickly to Abner's knock, which meant that he was not treating anyone.

His mouth quirked behind his wispy beard as he saw the three of us.

"Well! Which of you is the sick one?" he snapped. "None of you looks it."

"Perhaps Chapman is," my uncle answered. "We need your help."

The old doctor ran his hand through his graying reddish hair. "Come in, then."

Storm's office was on the left side of the hall as one entered. He lived in the rest of the house—alone, except for a black housekeeper who came daily to cook and clean for him.

He stood aside as we entered the office, bare except for a desk,

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two chairs, an examining table, and an instrument cabinet. The floors were dark from oil. We had scarcely passed the door when his nose wrinkled.

"Pah," he snorted. "One of you has been in a pigsty."

"None of us has," Abner said. "My hands were on the boots of a man who had."

"Then go to the back porch and wash them," Storm ordered. "I can think better without distractions."

Had I been my uncle, Storm would have been reminded that, as a doctor, he would have endured far worse things. Abner was not so tactless. He went to wash.

When he came back, Storm looked sharply at Chapman, who was in the chair. "Now, then, man," he said, "what seems to be the matter?"

Abner intervened. "Perhaps I had better tell it."

He proceeded to give a shortened account of the things that had happened. Storm listened intently. When Abner had finished, Storm showed his twisted teeth in a grin.

"So Thaxton wants him, does he? What's the charge—harboring a criminal?"

My uncle's only answer was to stare at him from beneath his busy brows. Storm cleared his throat.

"Very well, Abner. No harm done. However, indulge me. Where does a doctor enter this case?"

"In a moment," Abner responded. He turned to the demented man. "Chapman, you tell us that an unclean spirit lives in you."

Chapman threw back his head and laughed wildly. Storm started in his chair, but settled, observing the man closely.

Abner leaned close to the laughing man. "Chapman! The Chapman who knows me well! Do you want to be free of this thing?"

The laughter stopped, and Chapman whispered hoarsely, "Yes!" Then he began to chuckle.

"Where does it live in you, Chapman?"

Again the hoarse whisper. "Everywhere."

Uncle Abner glanced quickly at Storm, then concentrated again on Chapman.

"It can only be everywhere in you if it lives in one place, Chapman. Your blood."

Chapman stopped chuckling. He seemed to be listening warily.

"Then, if Storm bleeds you, you should be free." Abner turned to Storm. "Do you agree?"

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"It is my custom to withdraw a quart and a half," the old doctor said. "That should do it. If we want to be certain," he went on, "I could also purge him."

"No, no, no!" Chapman exclaimed. "The bleeding should be enough!"

Storm measured him with a look. "That reaction, at least, is normal."

He arose, addressing Chapman as he did. "Take off your cape and roll up your left sleeve." While the man obeyed, Storm opened the cabinet and took out a brass bowl and a razor.

He first placed Chapman's arm on the arm of a chair, resting on the bone. Then he put the brass bowl in the man's lap and arranged it so that the lip of the bowl was beneath the forearm, touching the flesh. He bent over the arm, studying the flesh a short distance from the elbow, toward the wrist. When he was satisfied, he opened the razor and made a quick, short slash across the skin.

A thin thread of red sprang forth on the surface of the flesh. As the seconds passed, it swelled into a thin stream and began to inch down toward the bowl. Then it flowed even freer and went steadily into the bottom of the bowl.

I watched with fascination. I wondered if the growing red pool would heave—or roll—or bubble—with the contortions of the demonic thing.

It did none of these things. It increased quietly.

Dr. Storm broke the silence. "I'll return in a moment." He left the room.

We stood watching the blood accumulate in the bowl. In a few moments, Storm returned with an old bucket stuffed with corn husks. He gave us a crooked smile.

"As I remember, swine were once involved in a situation like this." He peered into the bowl and grunted with satisfaction. He reached into his instrument bag and took out a needle and some stitching. Before we could concentrate, he went to work and closed Chapman's wound with a few quick stitches, then wiped it with a clean wet cloth he had brought in with him.

Chapman started to lift the bowl, but Storm took it from him and emptied the blood over the husks in the bucket. He held the bucket out to my uncle.

"Here, Abner," he said, "give this to your pigs."

Uncle Abner made no move to take it. He seemed to be looking for words to answer the old doctor.

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"I know you raise some pigs to sell," Storm said. "I was reminded of it when you didn't get all that smell off your hands. You still seem to have it."

Abner began to speak, then changed his mind. He began again, addressing Chapman.

"How do you feel now, Chapman?"

I saw now that the man had changed. His eyes no longer rolled, his breathing was slow and steady. He answered Uncle Abner in a quiet tone. "I think I'm myself again, Abner. I thank you. You, too, Storm."

Abner gripped his right hand. "You will be weak after losing your blood, Chapman. Let me help you stand. You must now go back and make your peace with Thaxton."

Chapman rose very slowly. "It was a terrible thing that was done to Blackburn, Abner. But Thaxton must surely see that I was only an unwilling tool. Nobody could doubt it. Even if I had no witness other than Tyler—"

"Yes, Chapman," said Uncle Abner, "Tyler, Bronson, Adam Bird, Martin, Thaxton himself, and—" he swung around "—Storm. These should be witnesses enough for any man."

"I am humble before them," Chapman said.

"And humble you should be," Abner said. "Some of God's own humble things will bear witness, also. Put on your cape, Chapman. Storm, will you get your coat? We must go see Thaxton."

The sheriff was standing by the wagon when we returned. At the sound of our voices, Tyler and the two preachers came out of the office.

"Well, Chapman," said the sheriff, "are you one man or two?"

"Only one."

I looked at Chapman again. He was still as calm and ordinary as he had been in Storm's office after losing his blood. In the sunlight, his boots were stained and his cape and hat still had spots of dried mud, but he had smoothed his hair and his beard. His clothing was not in disarray, as it might have been. Even coming from his own backyard or the woods, he would have looked worse.

Storm came forward. "The other one is in here." He held out the bucket.

Thaxton was perplexed. "I wish that Squire Randolph were here. I have a man who killed another, but he vows that one of Satan's

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creatures used his body to do it. Now that creature no longer controls him. Can I arrest him or not?"

He looked at the two preachers, then at Abner, and finally at Storm.

Uncle Abner was the only one to speak. "You can," he said gravely.

Adam Bird straightened. "Abner! Does this mean that you deny the presence of devils and unclean spirits? Do you defy the written testimony?"

"No," Abner replied. "It is plain that the devil exists. Chapman is proof of that. I am sure that the rest of those creatures are with us, as we are told. But we overlook the myriad instruments of good around us."

"I was seized by that thing, and it does prove that the devil exists!" Chapman exclaimed. "Yet you want me arrested!"

Uncle Abner ignored him. He motioned to Storm and drew him to the body in the wagon. As he had done for Thaxton, he lifted Blackburn's shoulders. "The neck," he said.

The old doctor examined Blackburn professionally. "I see," he said finally. "Broke his neck. But that is not what you mean."

Abner put the body down and faced the rest of us. In a few sentences, he reviewed again what we had been told about the killing.

"Why do you repeat, Abner?" Thaxton asked impatiently.

"To fix your mind on what was said," my uncle answered calmly. He walked over to Chapman.

"Why did you kill Blackburn?"

Chapman groped for words. "Why, Abner, who knows why an evil spirit does things?"

"Was it because the man was forcibly moving in on your land and Tyler's?"

"It could have been."

Abner seemed confronted by an enigma. "A strange demon that would right human wrongs."

Chapman shrugged.

Tyler had gone almost unnoticed until now. He spoke up. "Likely it was to cause trouble just as we were about to go to law over that land."

Abner was genuinely surprised. "I had heard the stories about Blackburn and his father, and I was puzzled when neither of you challenged Blackburn. I see."

He stood in thought, then raised his head. "Let us put that aside and consider other things. This morning when I helped bring Black-

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burn's body to the wagon, I left my nephew Martin behind to observe several things. Let me ask him what he saw.

"Martin, you went to the ledge opposite Scout's Rock. It is lower than the place where Blackburn fell, is it not?"

"Yes."

"If Blackburn stood at the edge of the rock, and you were on the other ledge, do you think you could have seen someone push him?"

"I think so. It's not so much lower."

"He was thrown down by the power of that thing I had in me!" Chapman interrupted.

My uncle ignored him. "If a stone had been thrown, it could have been heard by Tyler. Martin, if a long broken branch had been used to push Blackburn, could it have been seen?"

I nodded. "Yes. The rock is bare for fifty feet in every direction. The branch and the man using it could have been seen."

Chapman cut in once more. "Your memory is short, Abner. I was among the trees when I directed him to fall."

"What I say is not against your account," Abner said. "I am merely looking for the source of the splinters."

Chapman stopped, his mouth open. "Splinters?"

"In the back of his neck. Thaxton has seen them. Storm has seen them. I observed them when we moved the body."

Chapman laughed. "He fell on some old dead wood."

"No," said Abner. "There was none. There were only rocks where we lifted him."

There was a silence.

Storm returned to the body and turned it over with some difficulty. He took a knife from his pocket and probed the back of Blackburn's neck. In a few minutes, he came to each of us in turn, showing the contents of his hand, four large splinters, blood-stained at one end.

"Weathered wood," the sheriff said slowly.

"Weathered as a fence rail," Abner remarked.

Thaxton sighed. "There are plenty of those around."

"Especially at Blackburn's pigsty. Isn't that possible?" my uncle asked.

"It's possible," the sheriff answered. "Why there?"

"Because I believe that is where he was killed. He was taken to the ravine afterward."

"He fell from the rock!" Tyler exclaimed. "I saw him!"

Uncle Abner paid no attention to the small man. "When I helped to carry Blackburn from the ravine, I took on the smell of pigs from

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his boots. Storm later made me wash my hands. After that Storm accused me of not cleaning myself thoroughly. But I had."

He confronted Chapman again. "There was one other source of the stench. You had carried Blackburn under the arms. It was not on your hands. It was on your boots."

Chapman scorned this. "Most of us have pigs."

"Yes," Abner agreed. "I raise some myself, to sell in Cincinnati. But," he said, his voice lashing the other big man, "I have yet to see a pig on your land!"

He had only begun.

"Take off your boots, Chapman, and let Thaxton see them!"

Before the man could react, Abner's big hand shot out and grasped Tyler.

"Possession, indeed! There was no need for such a thing when not one but two of Satan's followers were at work! The entire thing is a series of lies. Blackburn was not killed by a fall, he was killed by a blow with a section of fence rail. The rail might still be on the ground at the pigsty."

He shook Tyler. "Because Chapman pretended for days to be demented, it was a planned act. All that you were asked to do was bear false witness, but that might have been enough."

He shook Tyler again. "No demented man had any part in this—not even Blackburn's father. Because he was old and sick, his own son doubted his stories against you and Chapman. When he began to see the truth and take direct action, you thought he had to be killed."

He marched Tyler over to the sheriff. "You'll have two after all, Thaxton, but not in one body."

Thaxton was awed. He already had a firm grip on Chapman.

"All of this because of some splinters and a smell of pigs?"

Uncle Abner shook his head. "Even less things than that. The instruments of good that I mentioned bothered me in addition to the things he has described." He walked to the wagon, pulling Tyler with him. Then he beckoned to me and to Thaxton, who came with Chapman in his grip.

"Martin, on the end," Abner directed. "Then the body, Chapman, and Tyler."

When we were aligned, Abner addressed everyone present. "Now, begin with Martin and observe the workings of those of God's things that are all about us."

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Storm sniffed. "I only see a good example of an ordinary boy, one dead man, and two rascals."

"Is there anything you cannot find anywhere?"

"The boy's been in the woods," the sheriff said. "He's scratched from briars and his clothes are snagged. His pants are covered with beggar-lice. Something I *can't* find?"

Comprehension began to come into his slate-gray eyes. He gave a long, searching glance to the body, then to Chapman and Tyler. He did not need the guidance of Abner's pointing finger.

"The boy was in the woods where everybody else was supposed to have been, even Blackburn. Yet he's the only one with snagged clothes, scratches, and beggar-lice!"

Adam Bird cleared his throat. "Abner, I believe the very stones would speak to you."

My uncle pulled at his brown beard. "You give me too much credit, Adam." He stooped and pulled one of the beggar-lice from my trousers.

"The plant is a weed," he said, "and it trusts its seed to this to multiply. An insignificant thing, and a plant that is worthless to us." He touched the two prongs of the prickles. "Can anything so persistent be worthless?"

He was looking at Chapman and Tyler, and his voice had a chill that even the November air lacked.

"I think not."

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

An outrageous, cheerful, Bell, Book, and Candle contribution in time for Halloween from George Baxt—published here with the same title he first submitted. Since then, George (a good man with titles) has suggested what he considers a better one—"Demons Are a Girl's Best Friend." Forgive us, George, we think we'll stick with the original . . .

CAULDRON BOIL, CAULDRON BUBBLE

by GEORGE BAXT

Edward Bligh didn't visit lawyers, lawyers visited him. He was that rich. At the age of thirty, he had inherited a real-estate empire from his father, divorced his wife, given her custody of their two daughters, and then married his mistress. A few months later, the second Mrs. Bligh offered the first Mrs. Bligh all her furs, jewelry, and unlimited use of her Saks charge-card if she would take the real-estate tycoon back. This deal was never consummated and the second Mrs. Bligh took to drink and infidelity and soon learned that Bligh was impervious to both. Now, ten years later, between martinis and lawyers, the second Mrs. Bligh, the former Stella Brackett, was enjoying the spectacle of her husband being made a fool of by three octogenarian ladies who refused to sell the brownstone home they shared on East Fifty-first Street.

The three old ladies purported to be sisters—Sybil, Cassandra, and Lilith Damon. It was rumored in the neighborhood that the Damon sisters weren't blood relations at all, but had been a team in vaudeville some sixty years earlier and were so closely knit a

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team that they came to believe they were really sisters. Yet there *was* a physical resemblance. The three were thin, walked with a stoop, and had gnarled fingers and parchment skin that made one neighbor insist they had been discovered and unwrapped in an archeological dig in Egypt.

Evelyn Sayers, tenant of the top floor of their brownstone, described the sisters as shabby gentility with a serendipitous flourish. Sybil, for example, sported a monocle and favored a bizarrely bright orange-and-purple knitted scarf, which she wore around her neck year round. She told Evelyn it was a gift from Isadora Duncan ("*Not* the one she wore on the fatal automobile outing, dearie.")

They were in the basement kitchen of the Damon apartment. Cassandra was at the stove, stirring the contents of a vast black cauldron. It seemed to Evelyn she was always stirring the contents of this same massive cauldron. She was reminded of a *pot au feu* a family in Paris she had once boarded with kept on the stove for what seemed like months. "We'd tried a lot of acts before we decided to become magicians," Cassandra said. "We were jugglers, high-wire artists, and fancy dancers. Then we turned to magic and that's what did us in."

"What happened?" asked Evelyn eagerly.

"We got too ambitious," said Cassandra, tossing in handfuls of exotic-looking herbs that caused small detonations in the cauldron. A mushroomlike cloud settled over her head like a pink beret. "We chose to saw a young man in half."

Evelyn leaned back in a rickety wooden chair that shook dangerously. "I thought every magic act included sawing somebody in half."

"Not vertically."

Lilith went on to explain that after vaudeville died, the three opened a tea shoppe. "Right here in the basement. In the spring and summer, we set out chairs and tables in the back yard and hired an accordion player. It was ever so gay. We called it Coven Garden." She readjusted the yellow-and-green feather boa around her neck. "This was a gift from Joseph."

"Joseph? Your husband?"

Lilith muttered, "I never married. None of us ever married. We never meant to marry. The family curse. For centuries. Centuries, I tell you, centuries."

Evelyn felt a frisson working its way up her spine. Lilith's voice was dark and querulous and Evelyn was glad the sisters (if they were really sisters) liked her. "Tell me about Joseph."

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"Joseph? What Joseph?"

"You said he gave you the boa you're wearing."

"Oh, *that* Joseph. I was his girl friend. He gave me the boa a couple of days before he disappeared." She cackled and picked up a deck of tarot cards from the kitchen table, shuffled, and began to deal. Evelyn stared at Cassandra at the cauldron and then at Sybil, who was sewing a rag doll and making what sounded like incantations under her breath. The face on the rag doll reminded Evelyn of someone but she couldn't quite place who.

"Joseph was stupid," Lilith said huskily, "just as stupid as Edward Bligh, trying to put us out of this house so he can tear it down and put up another of his ugly condominiums. Well, Joseph was stupid and Joseph disappeared." She fixed her eyes on Evelyn, who was mesmerized by Lilith's manipulation of the tarot cards. "Ever hear of Joseph Crater?"

Evelyn looked up into Lilith's piercing green eyes. "You mean Judge Crater? The one who disappeared back in 1930?"

"That's him. That was my Joseph. He sure did disappear, didn't he, girls?" Cassandra cackled and Sybil pierced her index finger with the needle and said something unbecoming for a woman her age.

Evelyn said, "That's funny. Mr. *Johnson* has disappeared. Have you heard?"

The three women stared at Evelyn. "Mr. Johnson?" Sybil's voice was unusually musical for one her age. (Everyone in the neighborhood assumed the sisters were well into their eighties and possibly beyond. They reminisced of things that happened very, *very* long ago.)

"Mr. Johnson?" Cassandra shrugged.

"Mr. *Johnson?*" Lilith was adjusting the earring that hung from her left ear. It was a crescent moon from which dangled an upturned man.

"Mr. Johnson who works in Mr. Bligh's office—the one who's been trying to buy up this entire group of brownstones."

"We'll never sell," said Lilith, patting Evelyn's hand. "You're safe upstairs for the rest of your life, if you should want to live here for the rest of your life."

Lilith was studying the cards and announced triumphantly, "I'm going to live here forever!"

"Where?" asked Cassandra blithely.

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"Right here in this house." Lilith nailed each word to their ears. "Right here in our beloved home."

"It was Jim that bought it for us," said Sybil, finished with the sewing and examining the doll for flaws.

Evelyn's interest was piqued anew. "Jim? Was Jim your lover?"

"For a while," Sybil admitted, holding up the doll for approval, "until he got too damned fat."

Evelyn crossed one leg over the other and leaned forward, one hand propping up her chin. "Would I have heard of Jim?"

"Jim Brady?" Sybil, for a startling moment, looked young and exquisite and Evelyn worried briefly she was seeing things. "Surely you've heard of Diamond Jim Brady. He gave me this house. But he never gave me diamonds."

"You never liked diamonds," commented Lilith, reshuffling the cards. "You said they were cold and heartless."

"Like real-estate people," said Sybil. The three cackled merrily in unison, and Evelyn's mind dwelt again on Mr. Johnson, was had been reported missing in the newspapers that morning.

Edward Bligh stared across the desk at his lawyer. Milton Montague stared right back at him. "Nobody disappears that suddenly," said Bligh with a snarl.

Montague was contaminating the air with cigar smoke. "There isn't a trace. And the papers have disappeared with him." He was referring to several agreements-to-sell the absent Jordan Johnson had acquired with great difficulty from three brownstone owners on East Fifty-first Street.

"Sounds fishy to me," said Bligh after a contemplative silence. "Have you heard of anyone else trying to pick up that property?"

"Everyone else is retrenching. You're the last of the big spenders."

"You think I'm overbuilding?"

"New York City's going to choke to death from overbuilding."

"I want those three crones out. I want them *out!*" Bligh was on his feet and leaning across the desk. "Once I own their property, I'll call a halt, I promise you. But after the trouble they've been giving me—"

"They're only fighting back," said Montague.

"They've been responsible for all the accidents plaguing that building site on the corner of Third Avenue!"

Montague chuckled. "Come on now, Ed. Three little old ladies?"

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"They were snooping around there last week before the elevator crashed and killed six of my best men—what about that?"

"What about it?"

"The night watchman said they brought him a thermos of hot soup."

"I'd say that was very kind of them. What kind of soup?"

"What kind is just the point! He remembers one sip and then passing out."

"He's also been reported drinking on the job. Booze has been known to cause people to pass out."

"He passed out and that elevator was tampered with!"

"We haven't been able to prove a thing."

"Don't I know it!" Bligh bristled at the memory of the police investigation. "The damned thermos disappeared!"

Montague looked uncomfortable. "The sisters say they took it away with them. They claim it's a family heirloom. The one with the boa says it was a gift from Dutch Schultz." He watched Bligh at the bar pouring himself a long bourbon and asked for a scotch for himself. He wanted to get away as soon as the meeting was over to a rendezvous in one of Bligh's unsold furnished condominiums with the luscious Stella Bligh. He hoped she was keeping her promise to stay sober. She had lately developed an annoying habit of setting fire to pieces of furniture while under the influence.

"What about the fire?" asked Bligh, settling back with his drink.

Montague almost fell out of his chair. "What fire?"

"What do you mean 'what fire?' " Bligh's hand was trembling and he was sloshing his drink. "The two nights' ago fire, that's what fire!" There had been a sudden flash storm in the city and it was reported that a strange bolt of lightning struck the construction shacks, starting a conflagration that could be seen as far north as Westchester and as far west as Jersey City. No one could explain lightning in November and nobody tried. (When Evelyn had discussed this phenomenon with the sisters, Cassandra told her lightning in November wasn't easy and Evelyn decided wisely to leave it at that.)

Bligh's fist struck his desk. "I want that block bought up! I want those ladies out of that brownstone! And I want *you* to see to it personally, or I get myself another lawyer!"

Montague paled. Bligh Real Estate, Incorporated was his most lucrative account. He couldn't afford to lose it.

"I'll see to it personally,"[2] he acquiesced. Bligh let out a piercing

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shriek, dropped his drink, and clutched his right arm with his left hand, ululating like one possessed.

Montague hurried to his side. "Ed, what's wrong? What is it?"

"My arm! My arm's killing me! Oh, my God! Do you suppose it's a heart attack?"

Sybil had stuck a pin into the rag doll's arm and was twisting it ferociously. "What are you doing?" asked Evelyn.

"Testing the texture," replied Sybil.

Evelyn stared at the doll's face and shook her head. "Why does that face look so familiar? Where would I have seen it?" She received no reply. Lilith was at the cauldron with Cassandra. Cassandra had dipped a ladle into the vat to give Lilith a taste. Lilith sipped from the ladle, ran the concoction around in her mouth like a vintner in France testing the new Beaujolais, and then whispered to Cassandra, "Too much eye of newt."

Later that same night, Evelyn was dining with Jack Harvey, a neighbor who had successfully defeated Edward Bligh five years ago when Bligh had tried to acquire a parcel of property that encompassed Jack's house; but Jack's property was allied with that of several famous actors, producers, and one composer, none of whom were interested in selling and all of whom defied Bligh's attempts at harassment.

"In strictest confidence, Jack," Evelyn said, leaning across the table in the crowded Chinese restaurant, "do you think the Damons indulge in black magic?"

Jack's chopsticks were poised in midair. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard what I said."

"Well, I've heard them referred to as witches by some local storekeepers who charge exorbitant prices. But I've never seen any of the three transporting themselves on broomsticks."

"But the elevator tragedy and the fire. The police even questioned *me.*"

"Well, that's to be expected. You're their tenant. You might be aware of something going on below you that nobody else would know."

Digging her chopsticks into a dish of shrimp and chicken ginger, Evelyn told about the sisters' allusions to the missing Judge Crater and the gift of the house from Diamond Jim Brady. Jack smiled. "The old ladies are having a good time. I think they're having a bit

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of fun. I've been their neighbor for over thirty years and I've never had a problem with them."

Evelyn put down her chopsticks. "Sybil made a rag doll this afternoon, and when she was finished she stuck a pin in its arm."

"So?"

"Twenty minutes later I heard an ambulance—I was back in my apartment with the radio going. When the news came on, it said Edward Bligh was taken to Bellevue suffering from pains in his arm from a suspected heart attack."

"And you think it's because of some voodoo Sybil was practicing."

Evelyn was about to insist that her mind was sound as a dollar when she remembered the dollar wasn't terribly sound. "Well, I just hope they don't let themselves be forced into selling the house. I don't want to go apartment-hunting again—at least not until the Edward Blighs of this city are good and gone."

Jack raised his eyebrows at her. Evelyn reached for her chopsticks and dug in once again.

In the Damons' basement kitchen a week later, Evelyn and the sisters were discussing the quick recovery of Edward Bligh and the sudden disappearance of Milton Montague.

"Wasn't he here to see you earlier this week?" Evelyn inquired.

Cassandra nodded, bobbing back and forth in a rocking chair, watching the steam rise from the bubbling cauldron. "We gave him tea. We got along just fine until he started putting on the pressure about the house."

Sybil was glaring at the rag doll she had stuck with the pin the week before, her restless old hands gripping and ungripping it, seeming at a loss. "I ought to wring its neck," she said. Then, flinging it aside impatiently, she smiled at Evelyn. "Are you doing anything special for Christmas?"

"Jack and I were talking about dinner."

"You can both have dinner with us here," said Sybil. The other two crones agreed readily. "Maybe by then there will be something to celebrate besides His birthday."

"You mean maybe Edward Bligh might finally back down?"

Cassandra nodded. "To think I was once very fond of a relative of his."

"Oh yes?" Evelyn heard Lilith shuffling the tarot deck. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sybil pluck at one of the numerous stray hairs growing from her chin.

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"He was a seafaring man," Cassandra said.

"You mean like Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty?*"

Sybil chuckled. Lilith cackled. Cassandra wiped a sudden tear from her eye with the back of her hand. "Sweet William. But lovers are ephemeral—real estate's forever." She was once again in control of her emotions. "Still, it was pleasant going out on the Thames with him. We'd stretch out on deck chairs and he'd read to me from *The Ruby Yacht of Omar Khayyam.*"

The following day was a Saturday, and it would be a day forever emblazoned on Evelyn's memory. It was a nightmare. It was as though every force of evil she had ever imagined had exploded on East Fifty-first Street. The tenants' committee formed by the house owners who did want to sell grouped and marched on the Damons' brownstone. From the back of his limousine parked at the corner of the street, Edward Bligh watched with ferret eyes, grasping a glass of scotch-and-soda from which he occasionally sipped. In front of him, sitting stiffly behind the steering wheel, his chauffeur watched the demonstrators with unexpressed disgust.

As members of the committee flung garbage and epithets at the brownstone with growing ferocity, Evelyn ran down the five flights to the basement, where she found the sisters amazingly unperturbed. Cassandra was stirring the contents of the cauldron, intoning an undecipherable incantation. Sybil was staring at the rag doll as if waiting for some inspiration. Lilith sat at the table staring into a crystal ball Evelyn had never seen before. It had probably materialized from one of the several steamer trunks stored in their back room.

"Shouldn't we call the police?" cried Evelyn. "They're getting uncontrollable!"

"Sit down," commanded Lilith harshly. Evelyn sat. "I see him."

"Where is he?" asked Sybil.

"In his limousine. It's parked at the end of the street."

"Is he alone?"

"A chauffeur's behind the wheel," reported Lilith. Evelyn craned her neck but could see nothing in the crystal ball. As she looked back at Sybil, she saw her set fire to the rag doll. Then she heard the explosion—and, seconds later, the wail of police sirens and fire engines.

The police and firemen were kept busy dispersing the mob and

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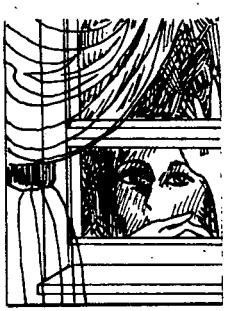
attending to Edward Bligh's funeral pyre. The chauffeur, who had miraculously escaped the holocaust when Bligh suddenly asked him to go to a nearby delicatessen to get him a bottle of Seltzer water, could offer no explanation for the detonation. The poor man was a wreck from his near brush with death.

Stella Bligh was now a wealthy widow. Milton Montague was located in an Atlantic City casino suffering from amnesia, a condition which reversed itself when he hit the jackpot on a dollar slot machine and was brought back to his senses. On that same day, Jordan Johnson phoned his wife from New Orleans, where for some inexplicable reason he found himself working as a shrimp fisherman. Or so he said. His wife wisely decided not to probe too deeply and welcomed him home for Christmas.

The newspapers gave Edward Bligh's obituary an unusual amount of space, mostly prompted by the circumstances of his death. The police could find no suspicion of foul play. It was embarrassing for a while, but other murders and atrocities soon replaced its interest in the public eye.

Studying Bligh's pictures in the newspapers, Evelyn was at first appalled. Now she remembered why the face on Sybil's doll had seemed so familiar. She had seen photographs of Edward Bligh numerous times in newspapers and magazines in the past. Then she relaxed. She liked the sisters so much. And, far more important, she knew they liked her—she could feel it in her bones.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Definition 2a of the word "morgue" in the unabridged Random House Dictionary of the English Language *is: "the reference library of clippings, mats, books, etc., kept by a newspaper, periodical, or other news agency."*

Leland Neville, author of EQMM "first story" #606 you are about to read, was born and raised in upstate New York. Soon after receiving a master's degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo he moved to Florida, where he taught reading at a high school and at a prison. He and his wife Ruth currently live in Alexandria, Virginia. He works in Washington, D.C., as a research librarian for a national news magazine. And so it would follow that what is, and what is not, on public record would be of greatest interest to him . . .

THE MORGUE

by LELAND NEVILLE

I work the night shift in the morgue of *The Gazette,* the only newspaper in a California city just large enough to support a Class AA baseball team. Since *The Gazette* is an afternoon newspaper I'm one of the few graveyard-shift employees. If a big story comes in over the wire, it's my responsibility to call the appropriate editor and immediately assemble pertinent background information. Because stories that can't wait for morning are rare, at night the morgue does resemble its namesake.

One sticky August night at about 2:00 A.M. the morgue suddenly became quiet and dark.

"Circuit breaker," I said. "It just can't handle the air conditioning." I do occasionally talk to myself on the job, but since the conversations

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are amiable and I haven't done it when others are present I've dismissed any concern with it as an occupational hazard.

I made my way in the dark to the circuit breaker, pulled the switch, and, sure enough, the lights and the air conditioning came back to life. Then I heard a voice not my own. "Don't move or I'll shoot."

I froze. There was something about his voice. I knew he meant business.

"Now slowly turn around and face me. But don't even think about trying anything."

I slowly turned and faced my potential murderer, a balding old man with his right hand in the pocket of his nylon jacket. He read my thoughts. "My .38 doesn't care how old the person is who pulls the trigger. Or maybe you think I'm bluffing—that there's nothing in my pocket but my hand."

"I have only about ten dollars on me. It's yours. There's not much else for you here, but it's all yours." My voice betrayed my fear. Stories about old people turning to crime—sometimes violent crime—had been coming over the wire in recent months.

"I don't want your money. I want you to find an old newspaper for me. February 21, 1922. And move it."

In less than a minute I had pulled the microform from the file.

"What's that?"

"February 21, 1922." Then I realized what he meant. "We don't keep old newspapers. They're all on microform. We can make copies from this. Do you want a copy?"

"I wanted to hear the newspaper being ripped. I wanted to feel the pieces in my hands." He paused. "You must have another set. Right? In case someone loses one. And don't lie."

"I'll get it. They're kept in the blue cabinet." In another minute I had given him the final copy of the February 21, 1922 issue.

"Is this the last one? If I find out you're lying—"

"That's it. It's not worth dying for, believe me."

"All right, I believe you. Now go back to your desk. Count to a thousand before you call the police. Remember what you said. It's not worth dying for. I might be crazy enough to shoot you at nine hundred and ninety-nine."

When I had reached eleven the lights again went out—before I had reached two hundred I began to rationalize why I shouldn't call the police.

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My description would be almost useless. An old man. Sixty-five? Seventy? Eighty? I'm not very good at determining ages. Average height and weight. Not much hair. No distinguishing marks. I had no idea what color his eyes were. The voice was all I could remember—and I'm not capable of doing impersonations.

Thomas Jones—our combination maintenance man and night watchman—would probably get fired.

For weeks I'd be the object of ridicule.

And the crime wasn't really that serious. I could replace the microform.

The more I thought about it, I was certain he hadn't really had a gun.

Yeah, the old guy was probably just trying to erase some of his past—wipe the slate clean before he died. He had probably been arrested when he was a young man. Perhaps he'd been named in a paternity suit.

About a half hour had gone by and I was just starting to calm down when the phone rang. I instantly recognized the gravelly voice. "I'm sorry I frightened you," he said. "I didn't think anyone would be in the library. As you probably know, I didn't have a gun. It was just something I had to do. Your life was never in danger, so don't have any bad dreams."

Then the click of his receiver.

After work I slept less than my usual four hours. By noon I was at City Hall.

"Can I help you?" the young woman in the historical records department asked pleasantly.

"Yes. I'd like to see the microform of *The Gazette* dated February 21, 1922."

"Funny, you're the second man to request an old newspaper today. We sometimes go weeks or even months without anyone asking. As a matter of fact, I think the other man who was in here also wanted to see a 1922 microform."

"Was he an older man?"

"Yes, he was. He was in first thing this morning."

"Did you stay with him when he was looking at the microform?"

"No, I don't have time for that. I just set him up at the reader and left him alone."

"Did he return the microform to you?"

She began to frown. "No. I told him to leave it in the machine."

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"Did he?"

"I haven't checked. Like I said, I'm pretty busy. Why? Do you think he took it with him? I'd have made a copy for him. It costs only ten cents a page. Excuse me, I'll go check."

Seconds later she was back. "It's not there."

"How many copies of the microform do you have?"

"Just the one. If one gets lost we can always get a duplicate printed from the copies *The Gazette* has. They're considered historical documents, you know. Even the State Capitol has a copy."

I nodded. "Thanks for your time." Oh oh. Next thing she'd probably do was contact *The Gazette* for a replacement.

But if she did, I never heard about it.

Two months later, in the early-morning hours, my television turned on to a late late movie, *Arapaho Warriors,* I spotted the old man. As a young man. On my next day off, I decided, I would make the tedious drive to the Capitol. I was intrigued.

But before leaving, I checked *The Gazette*'s microfilm just prior to and just after February 21, 1922, hoping to find a clue as to what happened on that day. Certainly a major crime or scandal would be mentioned on more than one day. It wouldn't have to be much of a scandal to make *The Gazette* in 1922, when the city's population was only 25,000. Nothing.

Next I found the current phonebook for Los Angeles and looked up Guy Lancing, the name the credits gave for the actor in the late late movie. Nothing.

But a 1952 *TV World* gave his real name: Walter Lackey. I found one in North Hollywood. I took a chance and dialed.

"Hello?" It was his voice. No mistake.

"I'm sorry, I've got the wrong number," I said, happily realizing that my voice is, if nothing else, undistinguished.

"That's all right."

The drive took me less than five hours.

"There is no February 21, 1922 microfilm." The assistant archivist, a rumpled, elderly man, was upset. "It's the help we get. They're careless. You have to be careful to work here. I'm certain it's just misplaced. If you give me your name and address, we'll be glad to send you copies of the issue when we locate the microfilm. I know it will turn up."

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I knew it would not, of course, turn up. Guy Lancing had been thorough.

"Could I look around?" I asked. "I work in *The Gazette*'s library. Our copy of that issue is also gone. The only remaining copy may be in your basement. If I find it, you get your duplicate. If I don't, it will save you man hours by not sending someone else down to search for it."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't do that. A missing *Gazette* isn't the most important item missing around here." He paused. "Go ahead if you want to. But it's a mess down there. And a sixty-year-old paper—there might not be much left of it."

Considering the poor lighting, the dust, and the general chaos, I considered the discovery of the missing newspaper in less than three hours a remarkable feat. It was yellow and brittle, but readable. Walter Lackey's name leaped from the faded newsprint on page nine. I carefully ripped out the story and placed it in my pocket.

"Any luck?" asked the archivist.

"No. It's a real mess down there. I decided it wasn't that important after all."

The next day, at home, I dialed Walter Lackey's number.

"Hello?" I didn't have to ask if I had the right number.

"Mr. Lackey, I'd like to read something to you."

"Who is this?"

" 'Walter Lackey's interpretation of Horatio as an amnesiac was certainly unique. Perhaps the young man's ability to turn *Hamlet* into a comedy should not be overlooked; indeed, his attempts to improve on Shakespeare's dialogue were occasionally successful. . . .' "

"I know it by heart. Look, I guess you want some money to stay quiet. That review is not exactly the kind of story the *National Enquirer* is looking for. But I did hold you up at *The Gazette*. Is that your angle? You *are* the librarian, right?"

"I am. But I don't want your money. I just want an explanation. You took a real chance to just get this old newspaper review."

"I know. I wasn't thinking. I walked into *The Gazette* with no real plan in mind. The place looked deserted. I figured nobody would be in the library. When I saw you, I panicked. I reverted to the kind of character I played in some early movies."

"It worked. Until I saw your old movie *Arapaho Warriors* on television the other night I didn't place you. When I did, I remembered

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loving your old TV show *Yuma*. Thursday nights in the early fifties. Deputy Clay, the no-nonsense lawman who helped tame the West. I never missed it."

"It was a pretty good show, wasn't it? Did you know that every one of those episodes is gone? Destroyed. Eighty-eight one-hour shows. Someone decided they were taking up too much space. You'd think they'd want to keep just one for a place in the history of television. Back when *Yuma* was a hit there were even signs on the road in your fine town that read BIRTHPLACE OF GUY LANCING."

"I remember."

"My sister still lives there. I was visiting her when I got the idea to take those newspapers. We were talking about my Shakespearean performance. I was just out of high school. I wanted to be famous. I wanted to leave my mark on the world, to be remembered. I didn't figure on forgetting my lines. I must have gotten stagefright.

"Anyway, it really turned out to be a lucky break. I never would have made it on Broadway. But I still believed in myself. I decided to give Hollywood a shot. They were still making silents. Things worked out pretty good. I invested my money in California real estate when it was still cheap. I've got a good life. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. It's just that those TV shows are gone and the movies I made weren't very good. They'll disappear in time. But that review. Those old *Gazettes* are considered historical. Talking with my sister, I realized it wasn't fair that *that* should live after me."

"I think I understand. I've got the only remaining copy. You'll get it in the mail."

"One last thing. I never blew a line on *Yuma*. Eighty-eight episodes and they never had to do a retake because of me."

A few days later the phone rang at the morgue.

"Thanks," said the gravelly voice. Then I heard the old, yellow February 21, 1922 newspaper clipping being ripped into pieces.

"Q"

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a distinguished reprint by

ANTHONY BOUCHER

When Markham took his dictation pad into the study, he had the fixed thought that his own life would be better if Bennington were dead, but no planned intent to bring about that betterment. Bennington changed all that . . .

This story, which up to this year has never appeared in EQMM or anywhere else since it was first published in Detective Short Stories *in 1941, is also included in a new collection of stories by Anthony Boucher,* Exeunt, Murderers, *edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and published by Southern Illinois University Press. The detective, the unassuming Lieutenant Herman Finch, will be familiar to Boucher fans as a subsidiary character in several of the Nick Noble stories that first appeared in EQMM. . .*

DESIGN FOR DYING

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

It is particularly easy to kill a man when he plots his own murder for you. This is especially true if his mind is superior to your own (which is incidentally one of your motives for murder) and you can feel assured that the plot has no flaws. You are spared all the creative pangs of the ordinary murderer; you are purely the interpretive artist, and all your energy can go into perfecting that interpretation, with no needless worry as to the soundness of the created structure.

Not that Ronald Markham would have phrased his position so elaborately as that. The ideas of that opening paragraph are more in the manner of John Bennington, who was always so shrewd at analyzing the thoughts of his characters and so sublimely oblivious

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to the thoughts of those around him. That, naturally, is why he had no notion that Markham had decided to murder him—no notion, even, that Markham might want to murder him.

When Markham took his dictation pad into the study that morning, he had the desire but not the decision—the fixed thought that his own life would be better if Bennington were dead, but no planned intent to bring about that betterment.

Bennington changed all that.

The old mystery novelist was pacing up and down the study, melodramatically enveloped in a black cape with crimson lining which flared flamelike with his movements. Day by day, thought Markham, this senile genius assumes more of the mannerisms of his sleuth, Dr. Carmichael. It would not be surprising to see him smoking a hookah.

Bennington paused in his pacing when he saw his secretary. "Ah, there you are," he said. Every weekday morning for five years he had said, "Ah, there you are," in exactly that same tone of courteous flamboyance. Ronald Markham had other and far more impressive motives for murder, but this was not the least in weight.

"Yes, sir," said Markham. "Have you straightened out that snag yet in *The Siege Perilous?*"

"Devil take *The Siege Perilous.*" The old man's eyes glittered. "It's good enough; it'd take another month of research on Arthurian symbolism, and at that the clues might be too subtle for the reviewers. I've something better than that. Look!"

Markham took the contraption of wood, steel, and rubber which his employer handed him and regarded it dutifully. "Interesting," he said. "What is it?"

Bennington sat down, throwing his cloak back so that he seemed to float in a pool of blood. "It's the plot of my next book. If I haven't been too smart even for myself." Involuntarily his eyelids closed.

"But what is it, sir?" Markham asked. He had to repeat his question twice before those aged lids opened again.

"Sorry," said Bennington brusquely. "It's getting worse. . . . But this little gadget now—it's a gem. It's the perfect murder." In the best manner of Dr. Carmichael, his fictional scholar-detective, he removed his black-ribboned glasses and began polishing them. This meant that a lecture was about to commence.

"You know the various tricks for shooting a man and making it look like suicide. Chief difficulty is getting the angle of the shot exactly right. Another easy way of slipping up is to shoot from so

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far off that you don't leave powder burns. But even if you avoid both those traps, you're left with the problem of fingerprints. If you wipe the gun after using it and press the corpse's hand on it, the odds are at least a hundred to one against your getting an absolutely normal arrangement of the fingers. Besides, there'll be too few prints, which will make the authorities suspicious. On the other hand, if you take a gun which the victim has been handling and wear gloves yourself, you leave smudges over his prints. But with this little jewel—I thought of it last evening and spent most of the night in the workshop constructing it."

Markham did not say, "So that's where you were." Such a remark might have indicated too clearly where he and the young and neglected Mrs. Bennington had been, and why they had wondered. Instead he asked, "How does it work?"

Bennington explained with almost childish enthusiasm. Next to his writing, mechanical ingenuity was what he loved most in such life as was left to him; and when, as now, the two passions fused, his joy was perfect.

The gadget was a wooden frame designed to hold a revolver. But no portion of the frame touched the weapon itself save two rubber-tipped metal clamps which held the barrel in a tight clasp. The pressure of the finger on another strip of rubber-coated metal pulled the trigger without fleshly contact.

"You see," Bennington expounded eagerly, "you get your victim to hold the gun—go target shooting with him—anything. You have exact and natural fingerprints. Then you slip the gun into this frame, wearing gloves to do so and never touching anything but the tip of the barrel. When you have shot the victim, you open the frame—so—and drop the gun where it might have fallen from his hand. Prints in natural position—no smudges—absolute proof of suicide."

"But how do you render your victim unconscious? He won't just sit there while you rig up the apparatus."

"Some mild narcotic. We'll pick one out of the materia medica."

"But wouldn't an autopsy reveal that?"

"There wouldn't even be an autopsy—surely not a stomach analysis."

"But why take the chance? It does rather spoil the perfection. Suppose . . ." Markham thought aloud, "suppose the victim were old and weak—like yourself, sir. Suppose he were subject, as you are, to sudden attacks of sleepiness, to which he sometimes gave in,

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falling sound asleep in the middle of a conversation. The murderer could wait his chance, and as soon as the victim was unconscious—"

"Splendid! Splendid, my boy! I think you've hit it. The only trouble is, have we created too perfect a crime? After all, Carmichael has to solve this."

"It certainly seems perfect," said Markham with quiet satisfaction.

They did all the spadework together—murderer and victim in happy creative collaboration. Firing actual shots into a wooden model of the human head, they worked out the exact angle that would be easiest to use and still consonant with suicide. They determined, by careful experimentation, how close the murderer could come to leave satisfactory powder burns without waking the sleeper. And still neither could find any flaw by which Dr. Carmichael might break the case.

On the morning of the seventh, Markham judged that the time was ripe. Today he would bring it off. Take the printed pistol after Bennington had fired a shot into the wooden head, slip the weapon into the gadget, wait for one of the writer's involuntary naps, and then— Then independence and Mrs. Bennington and comfort and perhaps even fame from those projected novels, known only to their author and himself, of which he could so easily abstract and use the outlines.

When Markham came into the study, Bennington was too excited even to say, "Ah, there you are." Instead he cried, "Got it, my boy! Got it!"

"Got what, sir?"

"The trick. The clue. The turning-point. Paraffin test!"

"I don't think I know about that."

"Should have thought of it before. It's perfect. Modern police method of testing a hand to see if it has recently discharged a firearm. The victim's prints are on the gun; that satisfies the police. But Carmichael insists on paraffin test—finds the victim's hand hasn't fired a gun within whatever the time limit is—make a note to check that—and there we are. Perfect!"

Markham stood very still. "Is it completely reliable, sir?"

"Completely. I was playing with it in the workshop last night. Give you a demonstration if you like." The old man threw the crimson-lined cape back over his right shoulder, picked up the revolver, and fired a shot into the head model. "Now to the naked eye my hand looks the same as ever, but there are minute particles in the

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skin which can be removed by paraffin. Come along to the workshop and—"

He broke off and sat down heavily. "I get so tired," he said. "I'd give every book I ever wrote—yes, and even the royalties from them—to be your age, Markham."

"I'd consider the deal, sir," said Markham dutifully.

"Sit down. We'll go to the workshop in a minute." He picked up a pencil and began to sharpen it with his pocket-knife—another Carmichael mannerism. "My mind is twice what it was at your age, but what is that without the— Damn! You see, even my fingers. . . ."

For a moment the sunken eyes lit up. "And there's another—make a note, Markham."

"Of what, sir?"

But Bennington was asleep. Markham would not need to make that note, nor any other ever. The secretary smiled; it had been so gratifying of the old man to point out and remedy the one flaw in the scheme just before he succumbed to it. But this was no time for ironic reflections; there was too much to be done.

The gadget worked excellently; Bennington had justly prided himself on being a first-rate craftsman. The bullet went in at the exact angle which Bennington had determined; and the pistol dropped to the floor on the precise spot which Bennington had fixed.

The rest was equally simple. Markham had resolved to destroy nothing; that was too often a give-away. Instead he left the room with the gadget and all the notes dealing with this plot. The notes he placed in his own room in a heap of similar papers; the gadget he dismantled and left in the workshop, so scattered among other fragments that the most ingenious mechanic could not have guessed its purpose.

Then he went to the kitchen.

"Mr. Bennington," he said, "asked me to tell you to make his eleven o'clock tea stronger this morning." And while the cook expostulated that she always made Mr. Bennington's tea as strong as any mortal man could drink it, Markham broke in with, "Wasn't that a shot?"

The cook remarked that there'd been shooting all morning and she wished Mr. Bennington would write a story about daggers or poison for a change.

"Just the same," said Markham, "I'd better see what's going on." And a few minutes later he put through a call to the police.

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He had expected to feel nervous when the police came; but Lieutenant Herman Finch did not in the least disconcert him. All had gone so smoothly that even Dr. Carmichael could not have daunted him, much less this mild little man with his plebeian unassumingness and his corncob pipe.

His one danger, Markham reflected, lay in letting this absurd little detective see the amusement which he felt at the interrogation. Yes, Mr. Bennington had been in ill health for some time—very little enjoyment left in life for him, poor fellow. No, Mrs. Bennington was away—spending the weekend with friends at Palm Springs. (It had been a good move to persuade Loretta to accept that invitation—clear her of suspicion and possibly keep her from forming any suspicions of her own.) He and the cook were the only people in the house. Yes, they were together when the shot was fired. (The cook now obligingly remembered hearing it.) Financial worries? No, not that he knew of; but what is a satisfactory bank balance, Lieutenant, when your health—?

"Thanks," Finch grunted. "I'll go see what the boys have found in the study. Routine, you understand—even in an open-and-shut case like this."

"Lieutenant," Markham smiled, "if you knew how often Mr. Bennington and I have slaved over a chapter of that same routine—"

The door caught on the rug as the Lieutenant closed it. That heavy rug was absurd anyway. We'll change that, Markham thought; bare floors and simple mats—less ostentatious but more truly impressive.

Lieutenant Finch returned with surprising quickness. "All right," he said. "Where is it?"

Markham started to his feet, paused, then relaxed. "Where is what, Lieutenant?"

"The gadget—the frame for the gun."

"I don't understand you." That was it. Blithe ignorance. Even though by some incredible chance they had guessed, there was nothing that could be proved. Nothing.

"Bennington didn't fire that shot."

"And how do you," he hesitated lightly, "deduce that?"

"Cut the smart stuff, Markham. You see, there was a perfect set of fingerprints on the gun."

Markham frowned. "But surely in that case—"

"Bennington's pocket knife was on the desk. He was sharpening a pencil before he was shot. He cut his finger. The shot killed him instantly, but the cut was made while he was alive. It bled. And

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there's no cut in the print of that finger on the gun. So come on, Markham, what did you hold the gun with?"

Suddenly Markham began to tremble violently, as the murderers always did in Bennington's mysteries when they cracked at the end, and in that moment he knew what that last unwritten note would have been. Bennington had happened on the perfect solution to his perfect crime.

DETECTIVERSE

THE DEED FOR THE WILL

by PHYLLIS WHITE

Aunt Imogene looks peaceful, though she never did in life.
No fingerprints are found upon the deep-thrust, crimsoned knife.
We'll answer all your questions without making any fuss.
Whyever should you think that she was stabbed by one of us?

She told us she would change her will because we brought her sorrow.
She called her lawyer yesterday. He was to come tomorrow.
Our loss is hard for us to bear and you could not be ruder.
When will you leave us to our grief and search for the intruder?

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(Ed. Note: Phyllis White is Mrs. Anthony Boucher.)

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a *NEW* short story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In 1969, Edward D. Hoch published a murder mystery set at the annual Mystery Writers of America Dinner honoring Edgar Allan Poe. The novel was titled The Shattered Raven *and the murder in it was solved by mystery writer Barney Hamet. This year, the fourteenth annual Bouchercon honoring writer/editor/critic Anthony Boucher (whose story "Design for Dying" ends on the previous page) will be held at the Barbizon Plaza in New York City over the weekend of October 21st. For the occasion, Mr. Hoch has fashioned a new murder mystery—and has once again dragged Barney Hamet away from his typewriter to solve it.*

A clever dying message, Barney Hamet's second auspicial appearance in print, and Mr. Hoch's mind-boggling umpteenth—all dedicated to the late, great Anthony Boucher and the enthusiastic fans who gather every year to honor him—and the genre he loved . . .

MURDER AT THE BOUCHERCON

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Barney Hamet arrived early at the Parkview Arms on Central Park South. The modern highrise hotel was busy on this Friday morning in October, though he doubted that much of the activity was directly connected with the Bouchercon scheduled to open at the hotel that evening. October was a good time to visit New York City, and a great many people were doing just that.

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"Ah, Barney Hamet—I was hoping you'd be here!" a familiar voice greeted him as he signed the room registration and accepted his key.

"Sid Coleman! How've you been?"

Sid was a writer in his mid-fifties who had been active in Mystery Writers of America during the years when Barney was on the Board of Directors of the organization. He'd hit the skids when his long-time publishers discontinued their unprofitable mystery line, and his only recent sales had been to a small paperback house on the West Coast. "I can't complain," Sid said, though the grin that split his bony face was only a shadow of the one Barney remembered from the old days. "I'm living in San Diego now."

"Somebody told me that. I've missed seeing you around. I live upstate now, but I come to the city when I can."

"Yeah. Well, I thought I'd fly in for the Bouchercon and look the old town over—catch up on old friends. I keep reading about you, Barney. Doing a book a year now and most of them making the best-seller lists! You're a big name now. How's Susan?"

"Great! She has an article in *The New Yorker* this week." Barney never tired of applauding his wife, who pursued a vigorous writing career of her own. "She's researching a new book, but she promised to come down for the closing luncheon on Sunday." He knew he'd be answering the same question all weekend as writers and mystery fans asked him about her.

Sid smiled sadly. "You're a lucky man, Barney. You've got everything."

"In the writing business it comes and goes, Sid."

"Don't I know it. My wife went about the same time as my publishers."

The bellman was waiting to carry his bags to his room.

"I'll see you tonight, Sid," Barney said. "We'll have a drink together."

"Let's do that," Sid agreed.

The Bouchercon had originated in Los Angeles in May of 1970 as an annual weekend gathering of mystery fans and writers. It was named in honor of the late Anthony Boucher, who died in 1968 after a long and distinguished career as a writer, editor, and critic in the mystery and science-fiction fields. In the second year of its existence, Bouchercon shifted to an October event, where it had remained most years, gradually falling into a pattern of moving from the West Coast to the East and then the Midwest before repeating the cycle.

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Although Barney Hamet had attended only a few of the thirteen previous Bouchercons, he knew they had been held in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee.

Though they did not attract the thousands of people who flocked to science-fiction conventions, the Bouchercons had gradually built attendance from less than a hundred in the early years to a figure that generally approached five hundred these days. Many of the local fans who helped organize them were otherwise involved in the field, operating mystery bookshops or publishing critical studies of the genre.

This year's Bouchercon, organized by columnist and film critic Chris Steinbrunner and bookseller-publisher Otto Penzler, was the second they'd presented in New York. The two were authors of the highly regarded *Encyclopedia of Mystery & Detection*.

Barney had been in his room less than half an hour when he received a phone call from Otto, checking to make sure he'd arrived. His next call was from Mike Manners, a fan from Florida who corresponded with Barney and had published an annotated bibliography of his works.

"Barney," he said, "how are you? Are you free? A bunch of us are in my room with a jug of wine. Come join us."

"Well—" Barney hesitated. There were some errands he wanted to do.

"There's someone here who's been digging into Kazer's background. You should talk to him."

Part of Bouchercon XIV was going to be a retrospective tribute to Conrad Kazer, a midwestern mystery writer who had lived practically as a recluse until his death in a fire five years earlier. Barney was to take part in a panel discussion of Kazer's writing the following afternoon and planned to speak about him at Sunday's concluding luncheon as well. It couldn't do any harm to chat with this man about him and maybe pick up some fresh insight. And Barney knew his presence would please Manners, even if it was only for a half hour.

"Sure, Mike," he said. "What room are you in?"

"Five forty-three. Turn left when you get off the elevator."

"I'll be right down."

Barney combed his hair and slipped into his sport coat, leaving the tie on the bureau. The weekend's festivities were beginning, and he wished Susan was with him . . .

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Room 543 was already crowded when he arrived, and Mike introduced him to the few people he didn't know. Mike was a genial middle-aged man with a short beard and a paunch that had grown since the last time Barney had seen him. "Here, Barney—I want you to meet Rain Wilson."

She was a pretty girl in her twenties, with long blonde hair worn straight to her shoulders. Barney shook her hand, noticed the nervously applied nailpolish, and said, "A character in my first novel was named Rain. It's an unusual name."

Her face lit up. "I know. I got it from your novel. It isn't the name I was born with."

"I'm flattered."

"I've read everything you've written, Mr. Hamet. I think I'm your biggest fan—even bigger than Mike here."

"Call me Barney. It will make me feel less old."

"All right. But I like older men."

Mike Manners tapped him on the shoulder.

"Barney, this is the fellow I mentioned on the phone. Dave Glass—Barney Hamet."

"Nice to meet you," Barney answered automatically. Glass was a thin young man with black hair and a prominent Adam's apple. The fans were getting younger every year.

"Kazer," the young man said at once, as if to grab Barney's attention before there were further interruptions. "What do you know about him?"

Barney shrugged. "A great mystery writer, something of a recluse in his last years—published a dozen novels and fifty or so short stories. He had a very cinematic style, which made his stuff great for movies and TV, but he was a hard man to deal with. Harder since he burned himself up in his Indiana farmhouse five years ago, leaving no heirs and only a small-town bank out there as literary executor of his estate. Nothing of his has been reprinted or filmed since his death because the bank's got it all tied up, and they're hell to deal with from what I hear."

Dave Glass nodded. "Those are the basic facts, but there's more. Did you know, for instance, that Kazer lived for a time in San Francisco, and was actually married for a few years?"

"Interesting," Barney admitted. "Maybe you can publish an article on him in one of the fan magazines."

"He was supposed to be fifty-seven when he died, but I think he was a year older than that."

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Barney wondered if anyone but a few loyal Kazer fans would really care. It was the man's writings that were important, after all. "I can see you've done a great deal of research," he said politely.

"Not only that, but I've got a great idea for the future. Every year science-fiction fans hold dozens of weekend conventions here in the U.S. and even overseas. For the mystery fan there's only the Bouchercon. I've been thinking of organizing a Kazercon, in memory of Conrad Kazer."

"Well, good luck," Barney told David Glass. "These things take a great deal of planning."

"Oh, I know that, I've been talking with Otto and Chris about all the work involved. But I think I could do it. I'm wondering about next spring, maybe in Chicago. —That's where I'm from."

"Kazercon," Barney repeated. "Well, I don't know—"

Rain Wilson reappeared at his elbow and Barney went off with her to a corner of the crowded room. She handed him a fresh glass of wine and said, "You really shouldn't spend too much time with some of these people. They'll talk your ears off if they get a chance."

"Thanks for rescuing me."

Mike Manners came over to join them. "What do you think of Dave's idea?"

"A Kazercon? Do we really need one?"

"I know—but he's a smart kid, he just might pull it off. Did you hear that Kazer's bank has sold the rights to all his books and stories?"

"Really? That's a surprise."

Manners nodded. "A guy named Howard Pryor. He sent out letters to publishers and film studios last week, with a copy of a letter from the bank confirming that he now owns the rights. Otto and Chris urged him to attend the Bouchercon tribute to Kazer and he said he'd be here tomorrow."

"I hear movie and TV companies have been trying to get those rights for years, to say nothing of paperback publishers. I wonder if Monica's heard about it." Monica Drews had been Kazer's editor before he died, but the books had gone out of print and her firm had relinquished all rights to them before the Kazer revival got under way.

"Is she coming?"

"I imagine so." Barney glanced at his watch. "Registration will be starting soon. I want to change and get down there."

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"Chris asked me to introduce you at the opening session tonight. O.K.?"

"Fine! I always like to have a *friend* introduce me."

An hour later Barney was at the registration desk, smiling gamely as a pretty redhead pinned his nametag on his lapel and a photographer snapped a picture. Because the Bouchercon was a three-day event with admissions available on a daily basis, his tag had a little gold star indicating he had paid for all three days. Other symbols would be used for those who arrived on Saturday or Sunday.

"Good to see you, Barney," Monica Drews said, coming up to him with a drink in her hand.

"Monica!" Barney said, giving her a quick hug. "How've you been?"

"I'm feeling a little old, Barney. Maybe I need a man." Though past fifty, Monica was still one of the most striking women on the Manhattan literary scene—tall and handsome, with piercing blue eyes and a razor-sharp mind that went to the heart of any problem. She'd known Conrad Kazer perhaps better than anyone in New York.

Barney glanced around the registration area and said, "Sid Coleman is here."

"That pest. He's after me to buy his new novel. The man's a has-been, Barney."

"He was a good writer once."

"That's right, he was."

Barney looked at her glass. "Can I get you another drink?"

Monica shook her head. "I'd better stay sober for the first session at least. Are you going to speak?"

"Just briefly. I hear someone has bought the rights to Kazer's things."

"I heard it, too. Damn, I wish I could have gotten to that bank first! Now I'll have to deal with this fellow Pryor, whoever he is."

"Does Heathway want to reissue Kazer's novels?"

She nodded. "We're starting a line of trade paperback mysteries from our backlist, and I'd like Kazer on it. We were crazy to let him get away. Pryor's talking about movie sales and that could really spark a Kazer revival."

By the time the opening session began early that evening, the place was full of familiar faces. Barney was chatting with Don West-

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lake and Mary Higgins Clark when Carolyn Penzler, Otto's wife, urged everyone to be seated so the program could begin.

Finally Chris and Otto took the stage to introduce Phyllis White, Anthony Boucher's widow and a regular guest at the Bouchercons honoring her husband—a charming woman. Then it was Mike Manners' turn.

"There's a fine program ahead of us this weekend," he began, speaking from a page of notes. "I know Chris has a fine selection of films for us, and I'm personally looking forward to the Sherlock Holmes panel tomorrow afternoon. And as you know, we'll also have a panel on the life and work of that master of the macabre mystery, Conrad Kazer.

"But right now I have the privilege of introducing the best-selling author of fifteen novels and numerous short stories. He and his wife live upstate now, but he's with us in Manhattan tonight and it's my great pleasure to introduce him—Barney Hamet!"

Barney rose, acknowledging the applause, and stepped to the microphone to offer the usual thanks. The audience seemed to want him to speak more but with two other appearances on the weekend schedule he didn't want to wear out his welcome.

Half an hour later, skipping the film program, he found himself in the bar with Sid Coleman and Rain Wilson. After a time Sid excused himself and he was alone with Rain. "Dave Glass keeps cornering Monica Drews," she told him.

"Probably telling her his plans for the Kazercon."

"What do you think of it?"

Barney shrugged.

"Tell me about your wife."

"She's Susan Veldt. She's a well known writer."

"So are you," Rain Wilson reminded him.

Barney stayed drinking with Rain until well after midnight. When he finally went back to his room, he saw the telephone-message light blinking an angry red, and his first thought was that Susan had tried to reach him. He called the message desk to discover Monica Drews had phoned him about five minutes earlier. Monica lived alone up in Stamford and had taken a room for the weekend to avoid the extra train travel. She had left a message for Barney to call her in Room 712 whenever he got in.

He tried 712 but there was no answer. It was only one floor below

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and he took the stairs down, thinking she might be at a party in a room down the hall. But the seventh floor was quiet.

He knocked at her door and there was no answer. On an impulse, he tried the doorknob and it opened. A small piece of tape had been placed over the latch bolt to keep it from locking when the door was closed.

Monica was slumped over the writing desk near her bed. An ugly-looking hunting knife protruded from the center of her back.

Barney took a deep breath and steadied himself against the wall. Who in the world would want to murder Monica Drews? He looked closer and saw a hotel pen in her right hand. She'd written something on the little memo pad by the phone. *Barney 806*—his room number—and then in a shaky scrawl he could barely read: *Kazer con.*

He left the room, careful not to touch anything, and went downstairs to report his discovery to hotel security.

Following an hour of police questioning and a 2:00 A.M. meeting with Chris and Otto, it was decided that the Bouchercon should continue on schedule, with a morning tribute to Monica. The police seemed convinced a hotel thief was responsible for the killing, tending to rule out participants at the Bouchercon as suspects. Still, there was the matter of her dying message—they weren't overlooking that.

Barney phoned Susan to tell her what had happened before she read it in the morning papers.

"Are you involved?" she asked.

"Of course not!"

"Then stay out of it, Barney," she pleaded. "I'll be down Sunday morning."

"Good. See you then."

"Barney?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"Me, too," he said.

He managed about four hours of restless sleep before he awakened and sat on the edge of the bed. The hotel maintained a running-track on the roof for guests who didn't like the idea of jogging through Central Park, especially in the early morning. He went up before breakfast and did a few laps. As he was about to go back down to

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his room, Dave Glass appeared from the stairwell, wearing running shorts.

"Morning, Mr. Hamet," he said with a wave.

"Barney."

"Sure. Barney. A terrible thing about Monica Drews."

"Terrible," Barney agreed.

"Do they know who did it?"

"The police think it was a sneak thief." He stopped at the door. "I saw you talking with Monica in the bar last night."

"Yes. I wanted to see what she thought of my idea for a Kazercon."

Barney was remembering the scrawled message the dying woman had left. So Monica had known about the Kazercon plans. Had her message been an attempt to implicate Dave Glass? Somehow he couldn't imagine this young man sneaking up behind anyone with a knife. "She was a fine editor," Barney said. "She'll be missed by a great many people."

As he turned toward the stairwell, Glass asked, "She was never married, was she?"

"Monica? No, I guess not. Not that I know of."

On the way downstairs, Barney wondered about the question.

After a quick breakfast, Barney found he was just in time for the opening nine o'clock session. A panel of collectors were discussing their personal libraries and the value of some out-of-print first editions. Barney knew his own first novel was often listed in catalogues for more than a hundred dollars, though that was nothing compared with some of the figures being discussed.

He drifted out when the session broke. Even at this early hour, the dealers' room was in full operation, and he headed in that direction.

More than a score of book dealers had tables, exhibiting a staggering variety of mystery and suspense fiction. There were musty volumes of Sax Rohmer and sleek dust-jacketed best-sellers by Robert Ludlum and John D. MacDonald. One table specialized in British imports, with the latest Dick Francis novel next to those of Ruth Rendell and P. D. James. There were exhibits from small publishers who specialized in Sherlockiana and pulp reprints, and a university press that put out a line of popular culture books. At one end of the room was a blown-up photograph of Conrad Kazer. At the other end, Barney was horrified to note, was an equally large picture of himself.

As he was leaving the dealers' room, a slender man with grey hair

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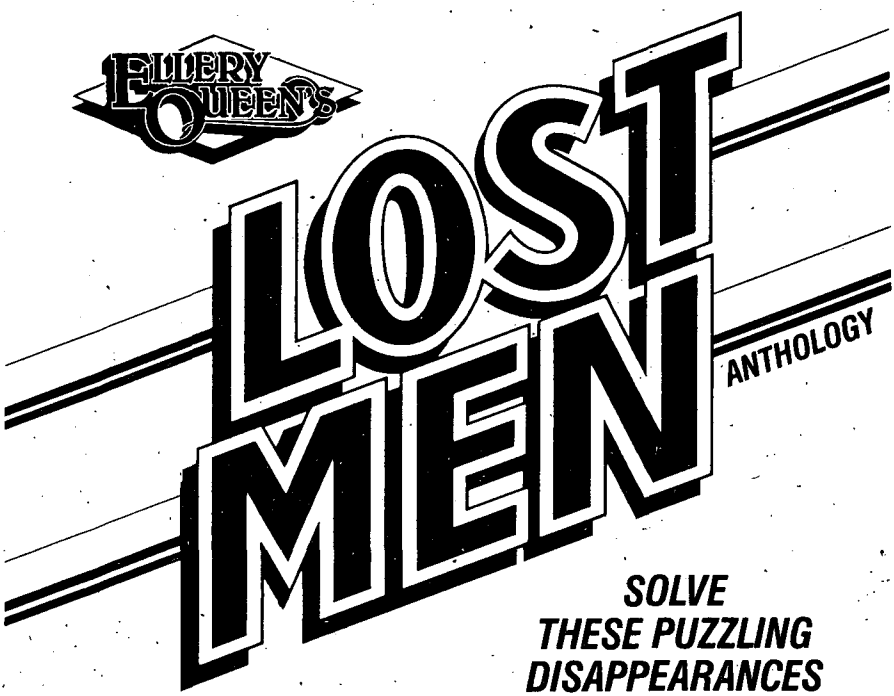
THE SEARCH IS ON... 21 MISSING MEN IN



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and a blotched face stopped and gazed at his name tag. "You're Barney Hamet?"

"That's right," Barney admitted, reaching for his pen. By now he was used to encountering autograph seekers at these gatherings. But then he noticed the name beside the star on the man's own tag. "Howard Pryor. You're the one who bought the rights to Kazer's books!"

The slim man nodded. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Barney led him to one of the conference rooms that was not in use and they went inside and sat down. "I suppose you've heard we had a killing here last night."

Pryor nodded. "Monica Drews. I'd planned to meet with her today regarding the Kazer books. Her firm wished to make an offer. I thought you might know who I should see now."

"Her assistant, I suppose. I can find out the name for you."

"I just arrived this morning, and I only have a few days in New York. I've contacted other publishers, of course, but I feel Kazer would have wanted me to give Heathway first chance at the books."

"I understand you've offered the film and television rights as well."

Another nod. "I already have a tentative agreement with an independent producer. He's willing to take an option on all the available properties for a significant sum of money."

"How did you manage to purchase it all from the bank?"

"By the terms of Kazer's will, all profits from his literary estate were to go to a college in Ohio. The bank changed officers and the new man decided the easiest way to fulfill the terms was to sell everything to a single buyer and be rid of it. I happened to make an offer at the right time and I was accepted. It was a very generous offer, I might add. I've been a fan of Kazer for years. And of your books, too."

"Thank you."

Writer Ed Hunsburger stuck his head in the doorway to tell Barney the police wanted to question him some more. Barney said he'd be right there and got to his feet. "Are there any leads?" Pryor asked, following him to the door.

"Nothing much. They think it was a robbery."

"If I can be of service—"

"Thanks—I'll tell them you're here. Since you had an appointment with her today, they might want to talk to you."

Sergeant Ambrose, a detective he'd met last night, was waiting

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with a police stenographer. "We need a statement about your finding the body, Mr. Hamet. I brought the stenographer along to save you a trip down to the station."

Barney told him about the arrival of Howard Pryor and also about Dave Glass's plans for a Kazercon. "You'll remember I mentioned her dying message last night, Sergeant."

Ambrose was only mildly impressed. "The only dying message that means very much, Mr. Hamet, is when the victim lives long enough to point a finger at the accused and say, 'You killed me.' And some courts have been known to toss even that out."

"You're still stuck on your robbery motive, is that it?"

"Until you can give me a better one."

Barney felt the urge to play detective in spite of himself. "You saw the way that door was gimmicked with a piece of tape. The killer had to be in the room to do it. Hotel-room doors open in. If he'd merely knocked at her door with a question, Monica would have had the edge of the door, with its latch bolt, toward herself. A stranger couldn't have taped it like that. And a hotel employee would have no need to. But if the killer was an acquaintance visiting her room, who wanted to return later, he or she could have fixed the lock on the way out."

"No one admits being in her room last night."

"That's not surprising. But she tried to call me about something just before she was killed. I checked with the message desk and she phoned not five minutes before I returned to my room. At about the time I was trying to call her, the killer must have just finished the job. Someone was there. Someone alarmed her, or threatened her, and told her something that scared her. He or she returned to the room, overheard her trying to reach me, and stabbed her. It's the only thing that makes sense. She wasn't robbed, was she?"

"We still don't know. There was a little money in her wallet, but more might have been taken. Or some jewelry. We can't know for a while."

"Monica wasn't big on jewelry."

Sergeant Ambrose sighed. "I'm keeping an open mind, Mr. Hamet. That's why I wanted to get your statement. I plan to question a great many other people, too."

Barney calmed down and quickly described the previous night's events once more. After a few more questions, Ambrose said he could go. Meeting Stanley Ellin in the hallway, Barney talked with him about the killing. The news had attracted more than the usual num-

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ber of reporters and television crews, anxious to get some new angle on this murder among mystery fans and writers. Because he had found Monica, Barney was a special target of their attention, and so he spent the rest of the morning in his room just to be away from them.

The afternoon sessions went well and afterward Barney had dinner with Mike Manners and Rain Wilson at a surprisingly cozy restaurant only a block from the hotel.

"Did you meet Howard Pryor?" Manners asked Barney as the waitress served their drinks.

Barney nodded. "He saw a chance to buy up Kazer's works at a good price and now he's trying to make a bundle. I only wish the bankers had consulted with the Mystery Writers."

"Kazer never belonged to the Mystery Writers of America, did he?"

"I guess not. That was part of the problem—his reclusive life style."

"You know what Dave Glass told me?" Rain said. "He was talking about Kazer being married once and he said maybe his ex-wife was Monica Drews."

"That kid should know better than to dream up something like that," Barney said angrily. "Monica was Kazer's editor, period."

"I told him that. He backed down—said he was only kidding."

"Some joke."

"But you said she left a message about the Kazercon," Mike pointed out. "That could implicate Glass."

"The police don't think so," Barney told him.

After dinner, back at the hotel, Chris was running a film program of some rarely screened Hitchcock masterpieces. But the high point of the evening was an original one-act musical mystery, staged in the hotel's own theater. Barney enjoyed it immensely, and for a time he almost forgot about Monica's death. Afterward Sid Coleman suggested a drink and Barney found himself down in the bar once more. "They're having a big turnout for tomorrow's closing luncheon," Sid said. "What are you going to speak about?"

"Kazer." Barney was beginning to feel very tired.

"Are you going to talk about how eccentric he was?"

"No, I think I'll limit myself to what a great mystery writer he was. We're all eccentric in our own way, Sid, and maybe writers are

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bound to be eccentric. I guess no one will ever know about Kazer's messed-up life, but it seems he wanted it that way."

"The fire that killed him was never fully explained. Do you think it was murder?"

"By the same person who killed Monica?" Barney smiled. "Now you're talking like a mystery writer. But five years between crimes is a long time for there to be a connection. He lived in an old farmhouse with a wood-burning stove. He probably smoked. Anything could have caused the fire."

"He's buried out there, isn't he?"

"So I hear. With just a plain headstone."

Sid sighed. "I could have used a chance to talk with Monica before she died." He ordered another drink. "I need a break, Barney. I need one badly."

"Don't we all."

"Hell, you're doing all right."

"Most years Susan brings in as much income as I do just writing articles."

"You're not a has-been like me."

Barney got to his feet. The conversation was getting maudlin. "I'm going upstairs. I want to take in one of those Hitchcock films."

"Yeah."

Barney felt sorry for the man, but the tides of popularity were strange indeed. Perhaps Sid Coleman's day really had passed. Or maybe he'd have to wait until he was five years in his grave, like Conrad Kazer, to be rediscovered.

In the morning Barney woke up early. He lay in bed for a long time, staring at the gradually brightening ceiling as daylight seeped in around the drapes. Finally he called the desk and asked to be connected with one of the other rooms in the hotel. There was no answer and he decided maybe it was just as well. He didn't know exactly what he intended to say to the person he thought had killed Monica Drews.

He took the elevator to the roof once more and started his morning jogging. He'd been twice around the track, breathing in the fresh morning air of the quiet Sunday, when the stairwell door opened. He thought it would be Dave Glass again but it wasn't.

Howard Pryor closed the door and walked over to him. Barney broke his stride and said, "Good morning. Are you a runner?"

"Hardly," Pryor replied. "I was down in the lobby and the clerk

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told me you had just tried to phone my room. That young bore—Glass—was there and told me you run up here, so I thought I'd come up."

Barney gazed out toward Central Park, weighing his options. "I'm glad you did," he said. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What was that?"

"Why you killed Monica Drews."

Pryor laughed. "You must be joking."

"No."

"Why would I kill her?"

"That's what I asked you—but I think I can supply the answer. Your supposed purchase of the Kazer literary estate is a giant hoax, isn't it? The letter from the bank is a fraud. You made up the whole thing, hoping you could skim off several thousand dollars in book advances and film options, and be gone with the money before the truth was discovered. Monica somehow found out the truth, probably by phoning whoever she had dealt with at that bank. You were afraid she'd reveal the truth after she accused you, so when you left her room you taped the latch so you could reenter. When you heard her immediately pick up the phone and try to call me, you stabbed her to keep her quiet. But she lived long enough to scrawl out a dying message—not the single word *Kazercon* but two words, *Kazer con*. She was trying to tell us that the Kazer deal was a con game."

"You're guessing now."

"No. A dying woman wouldn't lift her pen from the paper accidentally. She made a space between the words because she meant it to be read as two words."

Howard Pryor moved a step closer. "I only arrived yesterday. I wasn't even here Friday night."

"That's what you told everyone, but your name tag has a star on it, and that star shows you registered Friday night for the full weekend. You probably arrived late or while most of us were attending one of the sessions, and so hardly anyone saw you. After the murder you decided it was best to say you got in Saturday morning."

Pryor moved fast, and Barney saw the knife in his hand. "If you went off this roof, you'd land all the way over in the park," he said quietly.

Barney was hemmed in, backed against the waist-high parapet that ran around the roof. He felt foolishly at the mercy of this man twenty years older than himself. Pryor was crouched slightly, like an experienced knife fighter moving in for the kill.

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"I'm going to tell you something before you die, Hamet. That money belongs to me. I wasn't conning anyone, whatever she thought. I think maybe she knew it, too. I think she recognized me at the end, and that's what her dying message really meant. It was the most basic sort of dying message. She was naming her killer."

Barney felt a chill pass through him. For the first time he was really frightened. "You can't mean—"

A grin spread across the blotched face. "Can't I? Those books are mine because I wrote them. I'm Conrad Kazer."

"You're insane. The fire—"

"The fire killed a homeless drifter who was visiting me. The police never knew about him so they assumed the body was mine. My face was burned a bit, but I got away and hid in the woods. Later I had plastic surgery to fix it, to give me a whole new appearance. But I need the money from my books. I came here to get it."

"I don't believe you," Barney said, but his mouth was dry.

Then there was a noise across the roof as Dave Glass opened the door. Howard Pryor waited no longer. He hurled himself forward. Barney dodged and Pryor went over the low wall.

He didn't make it as far as the park. He landed in the middle of the wide street below, between a cruising taxi and a horse-drawn carriage with three sightseers just turning to enter the park.

Susan was downstairs with Sergeant Ambrose. "Barney, a man just fell off the roof!"

He told them about Howard Pryor, but not about Conrad Kazer—maybe because he didn't want to believe it was true. Pryor was simply a madman who imagined himself to be Kazer.

That was the only explanation.

Wasn't it?

"I'm glad you're in time for my talk at lunch," he told Susan.

A few hours later she was with him and Guest of Honor John D. MacDonald at the head table when Barney rose to his feet. He waited for the applause to die and then gripped the microphone and began to speak.

"Today I want to talk about one of the great writers of our time," he said. "I want to tell you about Conrad Kazer. . ."

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

FAN PUBLICATIONS: Here's the latest on some publications by and for mystery fans:

One of the more impressive new fan magazines is *The Thieftaker Journals,* which bills itself as a mystery newsletter but recently took on the look of a slick 16-page magazine with a special issue devoted to turf mysteries. Each issue contains news, reviews, and letters. The racing issue added essays on racing in works by Conan Doyle and Dick Francis, profiles of Jack Dolph and Nat Gould, an article by Jon L. Breen, and a bibliography of racing novels and short stories. It's such a good job I can even overlook the misspelling of "sleuths" on the cover. Subscription information may be obtained from the editor, Paul Bishop, 31 Tahquitz Drive, Camarillo, CA 93010.

The latest paperback issue of the French-language magazine *Hard-Boiled Dicks* is devoted to Hillary Waugh. It includes photos, an interview with Waugh and an essay about his work, together with an article by him on police procedurals and a complete bibliography —which happily can be deciphered even by those with no knowledge of French. Subscription information can be had from editor Roger Martin, 1 route d'Halanzy-Piedmont, 54350 Mont-Saint-Martin, France.

A small newsletter devoted to the novels of Elizabeth Linington—also known as Dell Shannon and Lesley Egan—has been started by a longtime friend, Rinehart S. Potts, assistant professor of library science at Glassboro State College. Subscription to the quarterly is $12.00 per year, from Rinehart S. Potts, 1223 Glen Terrace, Glassboro, NJ 08028. (One of Dell Shannon's only two published short stories will be reprinted in next month's *EQMM.)*

PULP HEROES: The first of a four-volume history of series characters in the pulp magazines, Robert Sampson's *Yesterday's Faces: Volume One, Glory Figures,* has been published by Bowling Green U. Popular Press ($10.95 paper, $20.95 cloth). Sampson's knowledge and love of the old pulps are reflected in his fact-filled, overly

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vivid writing style, but his knowledge sometimes falters when he moves outside the pulps to examine other series characters of the period. Example: He considers Jimmy Dale, the Gray Seal, to be a bridge between "the final Sherlock Holmes collection, *His Last Bow*" (1917) and the first issue of *Black Mask* three years later—an odd notion and a false one, since the final Holmes collection was *The Case Book* (1927). Still, pulp enthusiasts will find much to their liking here, and we'll be watching for Sampson's later volumes.

More pulp heroes are on display in a new anthology, *The Defective Detective in the Pulps,* edited by Gary Hoppenstand & Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green U. Popular Press, $7.95 paper, $15.95 cloth). These six stories by mainly forgotten writers feature deformed or freakish sleuths from the pages of *Dime Mystery* and *Strange Detective Mysteries,* reprinted with original pulp illustrations and ads. The idea is a bit grotesque and the quality of the stories is average at best. Too bad the editors didn't include an adventure of D. L. Champion's legless Inspector Allhoff. He's one of the high spots of Bill Pronzini's fine new anthology, *The Arbor House Treasury of Detective & Mystery Stories from the Great Pulps* ($16.95), which also includes little-known gems by Hammett, Woolrich, Paul Cain, Fredric Brown, and others.

AVENGERS: Fans of the popular British television series *The Avengers* will be watching for a new trade paperback of that title by Dave Rogers, giving the plots of all 161 original episodes, with a detailed history of the series and more than 200 photos. It was published in England this spring by Michael Joseph, who'll be distributing it here in the fall.

P. D. JAMES: Britain's P. D. James, currently at work on a new Adam Dalgleish novel, has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). She was the only writer on the Queen's Birthday's Honours List this year.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: David R. Godine has an October title sure to interest Sherlockians. It's William Kotzwinkle's *Trouble in Bugland* ($12.95), a collection of five stories in which Inspector Mantis and the faithful Dr. Hopper solve mysteries involving a bookworm that ingests a coded message, kidnaped butterflies, and other entomological delights, all written and illustrated in the manner of Holmes and Watson.

Due in November from Foul Play Press is *Fevers and Chills* ($7.95), a paperback omnibus of three bizarre and little-known novels by Jon Manchip White: *Nightclimber* (1968), *The Game of Troy* (1971), and *The Garden Game* (1973).

This winter Scribners will publish *The Ancestral Precipice,* another mystery in the classic style by Sweden's leading crime novelist, Jan Ekstrom.

The Name of Annabel Lee by Julian Symons, a contemporary mystery with overtones of Poe, is due from Viking this winter.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

George Kennedy, the robust thriller actor, is as hearty and down-to-earth in real life as he is in his role as the chief mechanic in *Airport* I, II, and III, the only continuing player in a trio of high-flying films dealing with hijacking, bombs, sabotage, espionage, and international financial intrigue. Recently he expanded his contribution to our genre by writing a mystery, *Murder on Location* (Avon), casting himself—motion-picture veteran and small-plane pilot—as sleuth in a novel about a series of murders which occur during the shooting of a movie in Mexico. This audacious ploy comes off rather well, no doubt because of the author's grounding in a career of mystery films.

Kennedy started in the movies by playing bad guys—"Either heavy heavies or clown heavies," he recalls. Gradually he became noticed. In *Charade* (1963), written by Peter Stone, he is an amiable villain trying to kill Cary Grant in Paris while Audrey Hepburn tries to recover a fortune hidden by her dead husband. He is one of the early victims of an axe murderer in Robert Bloch's *Straightjacket* (1964), starring Joan Crawford. He is also one of the nightmarish figures with whom Gregory Peck, amnesia victim and possible killer, must cope in *Mirage* (1965), based on Howard Fast's *Fallen Angel*. Then, in 1967, he played a sympathetic convict in *Cool Hand Luke*. The role "showed producers I could do something other than kill people," he says—and won him a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award.

Since then, he has been a good supporting player in screen thrillers from *Death on the Nile* to *Death Ship*. On television, however, he has made his mark in two excellent crime series. *Sarge* (1970) cast Kennedy as a police detective who goes to pieces when his wife is killed by a car bomb meant for him; he leaves the force, takes vows as a priest, and later becomes involved with solving crime much like a street-wise American Father Brown. His portrayal of the savvy cleric was exactly right and drawn in part from youthful memories as an altar boy. (Recently he and Gene Kelly surprised one another by still being able to recite the Mass responses in Latin.) In *The Blue Knight* (1975), he portrayed Joseph Wambaugh's gritty, compassionate Bumper Morgan, a weary Los Angeles foot cop. (William Holden had originated the role and chose Kennedy for the television continuation. Wise choice.) Strangely, the actor has never been asked to play a private eye.

"I love a good mystery," Kennedy says with affection; he has been a fan of the Ellery Queen novels and

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EQMM since his youth. He plans to continue writing mysteries. His second attempt, *Murder on High,* has a killer strike aboard a plane carrying a group of stars back from a Middle Eastern film shoot—virtually a locked-room puzzle twenty thousand feet up, solved before landing. In his own movie career, George Kennedy will next play an FBI agent on the trail of an unusual bank robber.

Mystery television is looking up again, now that Horace Rumpole is returning to the Old Bailey once more. Six further cases will be attacked with gusto by the irascible, Dickensian barrister, and John Mortimer—the distinguished trial lawyer who is Rumpole's creator—recently shared with EQMN some of the crimes to come.

The opening episode brings Rumpole to Florida (his son has settled there) to face Moonies and murder. There is also a temporary estrangement with She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, left behind warning Horace she much prefers familiar English surroundings to American sun. Rumpole soon returns to his old court stand, however, and in short order involves himself with forged pictures, an African politician, an upper-class brothel, the "Old Boy network," a murder hunt, and a feminist cause. The final episode may or may not include Rumpole's demise.

Mortimer is amused by Rumpole's success. He confesses to "bits of stealing from the Sherlock Holmes stories—including the deliberate inconsistencies." Like Holmes, Rumpole—portrayed magnificently by Leo McKern, in a role first considered for Alastair Sim—is world-famous. Even snobbish Britons admit to watching Rumpole on ordinarily disdained commercial television, Mortimer relates, and in America lawyers are forming Rumpole Societies (no prosecutors allowed) which meet at "Pommeroy's Wine Bar." In his own legal career, Mortimer recently defended a gypsy charged with attempted murder who turned to him and said: "Rumpole would have got me off; why can't you?"

But Rumpole is busy—preparing some stunning defenses on PBS *Mystery!* television.

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INTERVIEW: CELIA FREMLIN (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: William Weaver, in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers,* says, "In a genre where careless, even ungrammatical, writing is more the rule than the exception, Celia Fremlin's graceful, polished style shines like a good deed." I'm not sure I agree that the mystery genre has more

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than its share of careless writers, but I do agree about the virtues of your style. Does it come easily to you?

FREMLIN: I don't think any author can—or indeed ought to—know very much about his own style. It should be as instinctive as walking. Have you ever tried to analyze just how you walk? Though your way of walking may indeed be very distinctive to the observer, you'd soon get your legs in a fine tangle if you tried to walk that way deliberately. —And, yes, I do find walking easy, so long as I don't think about it!

EQMN: You have a degree in classics from Oxford. What are your memories of those years?

FREMLIN: I loved Oxford during my first two years. I loved the work, the feeling of belonging among these beautiful old buildings, and I made friends in Somerville very quickly and had a lot of fun. Also, I was full of conceit (I was the only girl from my school ever to have won an open scholarship to Oxford), and the sense of achievement, of having actually *got* there, was like being permanently drunk. I went to everything that was going in the way of debates, discussions, etc., but somehow never acquired any boy friends, despite the 8-to-1 male-female ratio in my favor. This dearth of boy friends bothered me quite a lot, especially during the last year or so—and I still don't know why it was. Certainly it was nothing to do with the college restrictions, because other girls managed all right.

EQMN: We have published some of your verse. Do you write much of it?

FREMLIN: Light verse mostly, satirical, on current affairs, trendy notions, etc. Most of it is unpublished and was written to amuse friends.

EQMN: Your first novel, *The Hours Before Dawn,* won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America. How did you come to write it?

FREMLIN: The Hours Before Dawn was inspired largely by my second baby, who cried on and off all night, every night, for her first 2½ years. Sleep-deprivation became terrifying, and I remember sitting with her in my lap, my head spinning, and thinking, this is a far more grueling experience than being in a battle, or threatened by murder—why has no one ever written a thriller about it? —And so I decided to do so, though it was several years later before I actually set pen to paper.

EQMN: You live in an old house overlooking Hampstead Heath. How old is the house and are you given to long walks on the Heath?

FREMLIN: My house is just over 130 years old, and still—touch wood!—standing sturdily. —Yes, I spend quite a lot of time on the Heath, though not exactly walking. Most of my books have been written there, lying in the long grass by the ponds. The time I like walking on the Heath is at night, especially in winter, when you don't meet a soul for miles and you feel the whole world belongs just to you.

EQMN: Do you have any special interests outside of writing?

FREMLIN: I suppose my chief

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interests center on friends: gossip, arguing, problem-solving, exchanging oddball ideas. Oh, and cooking—obviously a *sine qua non* of the aforementioned. —I still enjoy Latin and Greek literature —Homer in the original would be my desert-island choice, I think—and I also dabble in other ancient languages—Sanskrit, Sumerian, ancient Egyptian.

EQMN: "Her Number on It," one of my favorites of your stories, evokes London during World War II very vividly. Was its based on your personal observations at the time?

FREMLIN: I'm so glad you liked "Her Number on It"—it is one of my favorites, and was written in a white-heat of recollection. Yes, it *is* based on my own involvement in the London Blitz, although the actual incident was—happily—not mine. The whole scene and the atmosphere are, however, exactly as I experienced them, including that ecstasy of joy and excitement which seems to be a by-product of extreme physical danger. —That's exactly how it was for me, and I knew I'd have to write a story about it sometime. I wouldn't have missed any of it for anything in the world.

EQMN: Other favorite stories of mine, "The Coldness of a Thousand Suns" and "From the Locked Room Upstairs," along with much else that you've written display extraordinary insight into the minds of children *and* adults, as well as an extrasensory insight—time, place, and characters seen from an unusual dimension. Could you comment on these gifted insights?

FREMLIN: It's difficult. I'm flattered, of course, by what you say, but I don't think it's ever possible to say where a story comes from, or why it presents itself from the angle it does. What seems to happen is that a character, or a situation, seems to arise as it were from nowhere and proceeds to take over one's whole mind, worrying your brain like a dog with a bone, refusing to let go until you sit down and work it out properly, and actually write the thing. Only then does this obsession—compulsion, whatever it is—relax its grip.

And even then, this only happens when you've got it *right*. If, when I think I've finished a story, I still feel myself obsessed by it and in its grip, then I know it *isn't* finished—something in it still has to be worked on and put right.

EQMN: You've written chillingly of extramarital affairs. Do you think they're usually a case of one or both parties not knowing what they're doing?

FREMLIN: I think extramarital adventurers *do* know what they are doing. They're liable to miscalculate the consequences, though, seeing only the side of the scales that is weighted in their favor. —They tend to be more inclined even than most of us to ignore the built-in boomerang effect of most acts of selfishness.

EQMN: You've used the name Dorothy in more than one book and most writers *do* reuse given names often in the body of their work. Have you any comments about how you go about choosing names for your characters?

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FREMLIN: You're right—I hadn't noticed all these Dorothys until you pointed them out. I don't know that I can explain it—though I do like the name. You must remember that the naming of characters is often less a matter of choice than a process of elimination—the avoiding of names of family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, famous people, touchy people, characters from one's latest book—the taboo list is endless. So don't read too much into whatever name finally survives this intensive screening.

EQMN: What can we look forward to reading by you in the near future?

FREMLIN: I've been working for the last two or three years on a non-fiction book—*The Muggings and the Myths*—about the alleged dangers to a woman walking around London on her own late at night. Researched "live," of course, by myself, over many months. —But I'm moving back into fiction now—what a relief!—and hope to publish my third collection of short stories with Gollancz before the end of the year.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

FOWL INTENT

by MARK GRENIER

Apprehending a klepto named Clark
In the bird sanctuary past dark,
A policeman severe
Queried, "Why are you here?"
Said the culprit: "Oh, just for a lark!"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

We're delighted to announce that, starting with the next issue, The Jury Box gavel will pass into the able hands of Allen J. Hubin.

In 1967, Allen founded *The Armchair Detective,* the first journal devoted to all aspects of the mystery genre. From 1968 until 1971, he was mystery reviewer for *The New York Times,* replacing Anthony Boucher, who died in 1968. He edited several of the annual *Best Detective Stories of the Year* and has just completed the formidable task of updating his *Bibliography of Crime Fiction,* which will be published by Garland in early fall. We count ourselves very fortunate that he has agreed to review books for *EQMM.* Following is a brief history of the distinguished reviewers who have preceded Allen.

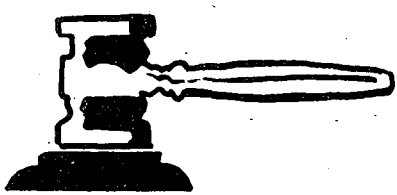
Howard Haycraft, *Speaking of Crime:* 10 columns between February 1946 and October 1948

Anthony Boucher, *Speaking of Crime:* 8 columns between February 1949 and May 1950; *Best Mysteries of the Month:* November 1957 through February 1968

Robert P. Mills, *Detective Directory:* June 1951 through September 1951, December 1951 through August 1956, April 1957 through October 1957

John Dickson Carr, *Best Mysteries of the Month:* January 1969 through April 1970; *The Jury Box:* May 1970 through February 1971, April 1971 through October 1976

Jon L. Breen, *The Jury Box:* January 1977 through October 1983



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An unusual short-short—with our respects to the Dramatic Romances of Robert Browning . . .

MY LAST DUKE

by PEARL G. ALDRICH

That's my late husband, that portrait on the wall. Charles Duke. Looking as he always did.

I had a famous artist come from New York to do it. Sit down, if you have the time, and take a close look. I don't put it out for everyone to see, but I hung it for you to get a sense of his personality and understand why I'm selling this house.

A remarkably handsome man, and that look is particularly compelling, wouldn't you say? Everyone did. Couple those looks—that flashing eye, that lustrous hair, that enigmatic smile—with a magnetism that created an electrical charge, almost, and you have an irresistible force. That force exerted what you might call twice its strength because he seemed to be restraining it with difficulty, as though he were preventing himself from responding to your attraction by sheer force of will. Everyone thought that, and acted accordingly. Particularly the women.

It didn't take me long to discover, after we were married—he for my family's advantages, I for what everyone else wanted—that that was just the way he looked. There was no feeling involved. He was a machine. He responded automatically and took the riches offered him so lavishly as his right. A divine right. After all, he knew no other.

I got as much as anyone. If I happened to be around. His reaction to me was the same as his reaction to any woman. From one of my position to one he picked up on a street corner when he was between appointments, it was all the same.

It would have taken less pride than mine to say, "I know." Nor could I bring myself to point out what a wife such as I deserved. And you know who I am and what I deserve. My family's pride has grown, and deservedly so, during the several generations since a poor but

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determined peasant from Sicily managed to make his dream come true—to live in America upon streets paved with gold. For him they *were* gold, and they still are. My family owns the streets and the gold upon them, and we always will, by one means or another. We are an aristocracy of a different order from the common run—but, there, I'm getting too intense.

The whole world knows who we are, and that I am the eldest daughter of the eldest son—good reason for a proposal of marriage from a man who wanted power, however unworthy of it he proved to be. How, then, does one such as I in a family such as mine say to a husband such as he, "Who was it this afternoon?" "How many last night?" Even if he made an excuse or restrained himself for a time—and it would always be just for a time—I still would be lowering myself. And I never lower myself.

His tomcatting increased, and I complained.

As you know, we have never had to establish ourselves in any market by brutality. The body in the automobile trunk is not our way, nor have my brothers and cousins ever found it necessary to be jealous or boast of sexual prowess. Their capabilities are well known and appropriately admired. My godfather, who is a scholar with the wit to make the punishment fit the crime, knew that a hint of disbelief to one such as my husband would produce instant assertions, instant willingness to prove himself.

With the bet made and the hand shaken, my brothers took him to one of our hotel properties in Atlantic City, where all were ready and waiting. He was given more than he could handle, and the subsequent display of jealousy at the end of the pier produced the expected panic, the expected loss of footing on the slippery surface.

Well, there he stands, in a portrait on the wall, looking as he always did.

Let us now go downstairs together, shall we? You can start your inspection in the basement. Knowing your employer's reputation for generosity to members of my family, I'm sure he will not think the price too high for a mansion of such quality as this. As we go, notice the statuary of the Greek god Pan, half man, half goat . . .

"Q"

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a *NEW* Hollywood story by

RON GOULART

"And, my fellow Americans—" Beans pointed a finger at the low ceiling of the narrow restaurant like a movie senator delivering an oration "—do you know what is even worse? I'll tell you what is even worse. They're stealing my life! My life! Juliet steals it and makes it into a book. Next Lonnie Sheck, Junior steals it and makes it into a movie . . ."

—

IT WAS BAD ENOUGH

by RON GOULART

They only believed he was the Son of Satan killer for a day or so. Then the police realized they'd made a mistake and shouldn't have gunned him down in the middle of the Sunset Strip like that.

Too late to do Beans Katzman much good. He was already lying in state in a satin-lined coffin in one of the most prestigious funeral chapels in the Los Angeles area by that time, surrounded by impressive funeral wreaths. The fancy sendoff was mostly Juliet's idea. Once he was dead and gone, she seemed to feel a bit more kindly toward Beans and, quite probably, she realized a lavish funeral would get the sort of media attention that'd provide some publicity for her upcoming book and movie.

Beans was preoccupied with that book of hers, and the possible movie, when I had lunch with him on a mild hazy spring day a little over three weeks ago. The restaurant was a small, narrow vegetarian place a block or so from the forlorn peach-colored apartment building in a bleakly rundown section of Hollywood Beans was living in at the moment. It was called Disgustingly Healthy and had only recently moved into what had been a surplus store. Signs offering

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Knapsacks At Low, Low Prices and *Desert Boots ½ Price!* still decorated the pocked plaster walls.

Beans came in out of the haze and did his swish wave. "Oh, there you are, sweets. God, but I'm glad you could ditch the wife." He switched into his truck driver and walked through the tangle of shaky tables toward where I was sitting. "Where you want that truckload of avocados?" he inquired of the lean young man with the moustache who ran the restaurant.

"How are you today, Mr. Katzman?" the young man inquired, grinning.

"How vas I? How vas I?" he inquired in his Dutch accent. "Mine poy, I'm disgustingly healthy, dot's how I vas." Bouncing twice, he settled into the chair opposite me.

As a matter of fact, he did look in pretty good shape. Nowhere near as good as he had when he'd starred on *The Funny, Funny Hour* on television nearly thirty years ago, but better than he had the last time my ad agency had tried to use him for some commercials.

"Beans," I told him, "I think I'll be able to persuade them to give you a chance to audition for the part of Mr. Mildew in our Kildew Spray spots that are—"

"Sure, sure," he said, reaching into an inside pocket of his eleven-year-old sportcoat. "Did you see this? Do you know what those gumballs are planning to do to me now?"

"Which—?"

"Ex-wife." He withdrew a folded-up copy of *Daily Variety* and waved it in the air. "Let me be more specific. Since my ex-wives are legion. I mean Juliet—Juliet Fairly. Gad, how could I have wed a wench with a name like that? Well, I was fifty at the time and fifty is a dangerous— Listen, sis, are you giving me the come-on?" He'd noticed a thin girl in jeans and sweatshirt at the next table.

Putting down her sprout-and-mock-meatloaf-on-pita-bread sandwich, she glanced over at him. "You were addressing me, gramps?"

"Never mind, I realize now it's only a tick." Beans dropped the trade paper on the tabletop and smoothed it out. "Waiter, cancel that magnum of carrot juice for the beauty at the next table. Where was I?"

The girl was watching him. "You look vaguely familiar. Were you somebody once?"

"Was I somebody?" His eyebrows quivered as he reached again into his coat.

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I figured the wallet was coming. "Beans, listen, I have to be back at the agency fairly soon. So let's just have lunch and then discuss the possibility of your doing—"

"Take a gander at that, girlie." The fat wallet was in his hand. He flipped it open and two dozen plastic coated photos came unfolding out to dangle between the tables. "There I am as Dr. Dingle-dangle during the 1954 premiere show of *The Funny, Funny Hour*. Next you see me politely fondling Marilyn Monroe when she guested on—"

"Oh, yes. You're Beans Katzman." She returned to her sandwich.

"I can help your show-business career, my child. I know a first-rate bordello down in Tijuana that specializes in ginks with a skinny fetish. If I put in a good word, they'll hire you like—"

"Beans," I cut in, "the client is worried you may not be dependable enough for a series of TV commercials that—"

"Not dependable? Me?" He fished in the pictures of his past career triumphs and folded them up into a neat packet. "I'm completely straightened out now. The bad days done been here and gone. I am off booze, off pills, off broads. I am a prince of good fellows. Boy Scouts ask *me* to help *them* across the street." He held out his hand and made it quiver like a hummingbird's wing. "See how steady that is?"

"Seriously, Beans," I said, "when we used you on the KleanJon commercials, you fell into the bathtub in the kitchen set not once but—"

"Three damn years ago is not now. I swear to you I haven't had a drink in over a year. Truly."

"There'll have to be an audition. About two weeks from now, if you can—"

"Squint at this item, will you." He jabbed his forefinger at an inner page of *Daily Variety*. "This is going to do more harm to my career than falling into a tub."

"What?"

"Here I am, at long last, on the comeback trail." He glanced around the nearly empty room, then lowered his voice. "I am not just being considered for demeaning parts in kitchen- and bathroom-product commercials any more, my lad. Nay, I am in contention for a lead role in a new sitcom that'll—well, I'm obliged not to give out details. The thing is, I'm still only fifty-seven. My best years are—"

"You're sixty-one," I reminded.

"Not any more. For the sake of my career I've gone back to fifty-

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seven. I'm fifty-seven, off the sauce, and by next week I have a full head of hair." He walked his fingers through the thinning spot at the back of his head. "I have my damn feet on the ladder again and then these gumballs come along to foul me up."

Picking up the trade paper, I skimmed the item he'd been jabbing at. "'Juliet Fairly, actress and author.' I didn't know she was an author."

"She scrawled her name and phone number on a lot of phonebooth walls in her youth—'Call me for a hot time.' That's the extent of her literary career."

"'Penning *I Married a Funny, Funny Man,* autobiog of her hectic life with once top comedian Beans Katzman. Publishers in Manhattan fighting over book. . .' You were only married to her for about three years."

"Two and a half, but I made the fatal error of confiding all of my past sins to her. I mean, she was my fourth wife and I figured it was my last go-round."

"Fifth wife."

"No, no. I never counted Irene."

"'. . .Lonnie Sheck, Junior, dynamic prez of Paragon Pictures, is near to optioning book for a major biopic to be called *Funny, Funny Man.* When last heard from, Beans Katzman was doing the dinner-theater circuit in Nebraska and—'"

"You've already reached the heart of the item." Beans snatched the paper out of my grasp. "Do you see what they're doing? First off, there'll be a book wherein I appear as a drunken, pill-popping monster who broke windows and kicked down doors in my palatial Beverly Hills mansion, carried on with dozens of showgirls, busted my wife's arm and behaved like a vile sot."

"Maybe a lawyer can—"

"How's a lawyer going to stop her from telling the truth? In those days I *was* a drunken, pill-popping monster who broke windows and kicked down doors in my palatial Beverly Hills mansion, carried on with dozens of showgirls, and busted my wife's arm—twice in fact." He stuffed *Variety* away in a coat pocket. "Then just as the last damaging afterglow of her nitwit book fades and I once again try to overcome the vissici . . . the vissywissy . . . the bum breaks of life, the damn motion picture hits the fan. There, in a twenty-million-dollar production, I'll be seen breaking arms, pinching fannies, snorting coke, rolling in the gutter all over again. It'll ruin me for good and all." He pointed a finger at the low ceiling, like a movie

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senator delivering an oration. "And, my fellow Americans, do you know what is even worse? I'll tell you what is even worse. They're stealing my life! My life! Juliet steals it and makes it into a book. Next Lonnie Sheck, Junior steals it and makes it into a movie!"

"Have you actually talked to an attorney?"

"Three of 'em. They say I haven't got a chance to stop it."

"Maybe it'd be best to leave the whole thing alone," I suggested. "A book and a movie might actually help your career. Years ago *The Jolson Story* gave Al Jolson a whole new career as—"

"Juliet isn't going to show me down on one knee singing *Mammy,*" Beans pointed out.

"Even so, Beans, the best thing to do is let it alone and—"

"Nix, amigo. I've already devised a surefire plan to get Juliet to cease her pranks. Yes, I intend . . . what is it, lad?"

The proprietor, who also acted as waiter, was hovering beside the table. "Might I take your orders, gentlemen?"

"I'll have the overalls," said Beans, pointing at a sign on the wall. "Two pairs for the price of one. Yum yum."

"Always kidding, huh, Mr. Katzman?"

" 'Tis me life's work, laddy. Did I ever show you the pictures of me on my—?"

"Several times."

I said, "I'll have the mock chop."

Beans took up his menu, brought it close to his face, adjusted a nonexistent monocle. "Mock chop . . . phony burger . . . fake steak. . ." he muttered. "Is this a real fake steak, old chop? I mean old chap. Wouldn't want a bloomin' fake fake steak, wot?"

"Well, it's made out of lentils, soy beans, carrots, and kelp."

"Ah, that's exactly how my dear old mammy down in Alabammy used to make it. I'll risk that and a glass of your Disgustingly Healthy Veggie Juice Cocktail #2. That's #2, mind you, not #1 or #3. And most certainly not #5."

The owner hurried off.

"As I was saying," said Beans, "I've concocted a clever scheme. Now, I admit that when we separated, Juliet was a bit nasty—"

"She had the police drag you out of the house in a straitjacket and manacles—"

"That was a bit nasty, wasn't it? Ah, but despite that, Juliet of all my many wives really was fond of me. Yes, my son, Juliet Fairly is a sucker for the ample Katzman charm. Therefore, I intend to persuade her to give up all thought of selling this tome."

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"It's going to take a hell of a lot of persuasion. They're talking about offering her something like five hundred thousand for the hardcover rights, according to this story in—"

"You underestimate my charm." Beans spread his arms wide. "Look at me—feast your orbs. I'm fit and trim again as well as completely reformed. If I put my mind to it, I can woo Juliet into abandoning the whole foolhardy venture."

"Maybe," I said, far from convinced.

The next day the agency sent me up to Seattle to do a little troubleshooting. One of our clients was introducing a new diet-aid pill called Fataway Plus and some unexpected problems had popped up. Nearly twenty percent of the people who tried the new pills not only cut down on their food intake, they ceased eating altogether. Nearly ten percent of these people also became very militant and declared they were on hunger strikes in support of various extremely radical causes.

The Fataway advertising manager had also flown to Seattle, which caused me an extra problem. I had to give soothing stories out to the media, come up with some quick radio commercials minimizing the dangers of the pills, supervise the quiet withdrawal of every damn bottle of the stuff from the shelves and keep anybody with a camera of any sort from getting a shot of that ad manager. Pictures of a 360-pound diet-aid executive wouldn't do us much good. All in all, I was in Seattle for ten long days. It rained a lot while I was there.

Meantime, Beans Katzman had commenced his assault on Juliet. It was, I learned from him later, a complete and absolute flop. Since throwing him out of their mansion in Beverly Hills, she'd had a high stone wall built all around the grounds. There was an electrified iron gate and, according to Beans, chunks of jagged bottle glass all along the top of the wall. When Beans, clad in his newest suit, a conservative banker's-grey model from 1971, arrived at the gates on a clear morning two days after our vegetarian lunch, he found himself being scrutinized by a video camera mounted up above the electrified gate.

"Your business, please?" inquired a metallic voice that came barking out of a speaker embedded in the stone wall.

"I've come to pay my respects to the lady of the house." Beans waved the bouquet of yellow roses he was toting at the eye of the camera.

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"Name, please?"

"Don't you recognize me?" He started to reach for his wallet full of pictures. "I'm Beans Katzman."

"Ben Katzman?"

"Beans! As in 'full of!' "

A silence followed.

The camera used the time to look him up and down.

"Beans?" A new voice came out of the speaker.

"Ah, Juliet, it does this old heart good to hear your lovely dulcet—"

"Get the hell off my property or I'll call the law!"

"Juliet, my sweet, I wish merely to—"

"I'm going to count ten. Make that fifteen for old times sake. I'm going to count to fifteen and then turn the dogs loose. One. . ."

"Dogs, m'love?"

"Killer dogs," amplified Juliet. "Mean and rotten killer dogs who go for the throat."

"I doubt they can get at me through the iron bars in the gate." He jiggled the bouquet up in front of the video camera. "Take a look at these posies, Juliet. Yellow roses, your favorite most—"

". . . four . . . five. . . ."

Sensing it wasn't the proper moment to launch his romantic campaign, Beans bowed to the camera eye. "I'll withdraw until you're in a better mood," he announced. "You may keep the flowers."

He bounded up closer to the gate, tossed the dozen bright-yellow roses over the high iron gate. There was a sentimental note attached and Beans hoped that might melt Juliet's heart a bit.

". . .fifteen!"

An alarm bell started ringing somewhere up near the mansion. Metal doors clanged and he heard a loud galloping noise.

Seconds later, two huge black and evil hounds came charging down the well kept lawn where once, in better days, Beans had strolled hand-in-hand with Juliet. One dog flung itself, snarling and slavering, at the gate. The other dog paused to worry the roses, ripping blossoms, wrapping paper, and tender note to shreds before joining its partner at the gate.

Shrugging philosophically, Beans sauntered down to his rented car and drove home.

Beans concluded that if he couldn't launch his romantic assault on Juliet at her home, he'd have to begin his campaign elsewhere. He considered himself a master of characterization and disguise, a

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fact attested to by his string of photos that showed him in sundry roles. He rented, on the cuff, a chauffeur's uniform and borrowed an impressive Mercedes sedan from his one-time agent, who still owed him a few small favors. Beans took to cruising through Juliet's posh neighborhood at various hours of the day and night. A few times he risked parking near the gates of the estate.

On his third day of this scouting, he saw the gates come rattling open and Juliet come barreling out of the drive alone in a silvery Jaguar. Discreetly, he followed her. It was midday and Beans assumed she was on her way to lunch. If he casually approached her, after doffing the disguise, in a public restaurant or cocktail bar she certainly couldn't set the cops or those dogs on him. And Beans was confident that once Juliet got an up-close look at him, her old affection would blossom once again.

It was probably while trailing his ex-wife through the narrow, winding streets that he listened to the news on the car radio and was inspired with the alternate notion that was to prove so unfortunate to him.

". . .The Son of Satan has struck again and stabbed two to death. That story after these messages," a handsome-voiced newscaster was saying as Beans followed Juliet.

"Skip the commercials, give me the gory details," whined Beans in his adenoidal teenager voice.

After spots for SweetiSink, Fat Ed's Homecooked Frozen Pizza, Nat and Phil's Tallman's Clothing Warehouse, and the very funeral parlor he'd be buried out of, the news of the world returned.

". . .Santa Monica police believe the crazed, self-styled Son of Satan killer has claimed two more unfortunate victims, this time in a quiet residential section of Santa Monica. Late this morning, the bodies of Roberta M. Weaver, thirty-seven, and her husband, Mark L. Weaver, forty-two, were found in the couple's Santa Monica home. Both had been stabbed numerous times and all the usual tokens had been left behind. The grim crimson Halloween mask representing the face of the Devil, the three black candles placed at the head of each victim in small silver holders, the brand new set of carving knives left at the feet of the final victim. The Son of Satan killer also, as has been his gruesome custom in all seven of his previous murders, left a bloody message scrawled on the Weavers' wall. In the blood of his victims he wrote, *Why don't you stop me?* Acting Police Chief Alan Alch says the police are—"

Shaking his head, Beans found a soothing music station. "All the

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goofy people hereabouts aren't in show business," he observed, returning his full attention to his former wife's car.

Juliet seemed to be heading for the ocean. She must be meeting someone for lunch at one of the beachfront restaurants along the Pacific.

Juliet didn't go to a restaurant, though. Instead she drove down to the beach town of San Amaro, some fifteen miles below Santa Monica. She drove up into the low hills, and swung into the driveway of a modest shingle cottage. As Beans drove by, he saw a man come out of the little house, run across the browning lawn, and put his arms around Juliet.

"I'll be damned," he remarked, recognizing the small blond man who was kissing his former wife.

I'd hoped to return to Los Angeles in time to sit in on Beans' audition for our Kildew Spray commercials, but another agency field job came up and I had to fly directly from Seattle to Detroit. The new trouble involved our Mother Malley's Zippy Zoop. There was evidence that some crank was visiting supermarkets in and around Detroit and tampering with packages of the new instant-soup mix. The problem was that most of the customers who got the tampered-with packages swore the soup tasted better than it ever had before. My assignment was to get a tampered package, have it analyzed, and find out what the devil the crank had added. I was also to come up with a series of radio spots designed to persuade the crank to give himself up. Our client wanted to offer him a job in the Mother Malley test kitchens. That kept me away from home an additional two weeks and I didn't get back until after Beans was buried. I had my wife send flowers—yellow roses—but I would've liked to have attended his funeral.

The day after the auditions, I phoned Beans from Detroit to find out how he'd done.

"I didn't bother to show up," he informed me, sounding unusually chipper.

"Why? Is something wrong, or—"

"Something is right, my lad," he said. "That deal I alluded to when last we dined at that compost heap masquerading as a restaurant has come through. I'm going in to sign the contracts next week, with thirteen weeks guaranteed. The tide is turning."

"Great. What is it? A sitcom?"

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"It's *Amos & Andy*—a new version with an all-white cast. I'm going to be Kingfish."

"Well . . . that's terrific, Beans. And you're certain it's set?"

"Just about," he said. "The only little snag is they want a notarized letter from Juliet in which she swears she's never going to write a book about me or a movie. See, if it looks like a lot of negative stuff about me is going to come out, even though I'm completely reformed, the people behind this new show feel it'll screw up the sales potential."

"You sound pretty elated," I said. "So you must've won Juliet over. Did your campaign—?"

"It was a total flop."

"Then how are you going to get her to—?"

"Juliet is carrying on a torrid romance with someone," he said. "It turns out, believe it or else, to be that gumball who's going to make the movie."

"Lonnie Sheck, Junior? But he's married to Tuffy Kash, the girl who plays the second nymphomaniac on *Outskirts of Houston*. One of our clients' co-sponsors that—"

"Since ven don't married peoples fool mit a liddle hanky-panky, mine poy?"

Beans then proceeded to explain to me, mostly in his Dr. Dingle-dangle accent, all he'd been up to since last we'd met—how he'd tailed Juliet to the hideaway she and the producer were using in San Amaro, how he'd followed her there several times and confirmed she was in the throes of a torrid affair, how she wasn't about to cease and let Beans win her over to his cause.

"I was quite taken aback when I saw who it was Juliet was fooling around with," Beans told me, back in a near approximation of his true voice. "First Lonnie Sheck, Junior stole my life. Now he steals my ex-wife and my chance to woo her out of the idea of publishing that damn book.

"Remember that old Fred Allen radio routine? Probably before your time. The judge is asking the defendant why he killed his rival. Turned out the dead man had borrowed this guy's money, his car, his clothes, and so on. He then swiped his best suit, and, sneaking into the guy's room at night, he stole his false teeth out of the glass beside his bed. The routine ends with the poor guy saying, 'It was bad enough, Judge, him using my money and my wedding suit. It was bad enough he married my girl, using the ring I'd bought for her. It was bad enough when he drove her off on their honeymoon

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in my car. It was bad enough when he stopped beside me on the street and rolled down the window of my car to razz me. But, Judge, when he laughed in my face with my teeth I up and lost my temper.' That's about how I feel, my boy."

"Wait now," I said, sensing a smug note in his voice. "You aren't planning something criminal, are you? Like blackmail?"

"Me? *Moi?* Do something *crooked?* Why, that'd break the little hearts of the millions of freckle-faced boys who look to me as a role model," he answered in his handsome nitwit voice. "Besides, blackmail won't work."

"How do you know?"

"Let us merely say I did some nosing around. Turns out Tuffy knows about the affair and doesn't give a hoot."

"Then what's left to—?"

"Not to worry, Guv. Be assured I'm not going to miss this last chance to get back into the limelight."

"C'mon," I told him, "this isn't your last chance. If this show doesn't pan out, you'll always—"

"This one will come through," Beans assured me and hung up.

Obviously Beans never confided in me what his intended solution to his problem was. I'm nearly certain, though, from what he did tell me and from what came out in the papers and on television after he was shot down in the street, that my conclusions come pretty close to the truth.

After watching Juliet for a while longer, he was able to work out a fairly accurate schedule of when she and Lonnie Sheck, Junior got together. He knew that one of the times they always got together in the cottage in San Amaro was on Thursday nights about ten. He picked Thursday night to make his move—who knows? maybe because Thursday was the night *The Funny, Funny Hour* had been on television back in the 1950s.

What Beans would do was simple. He would kill both Juliet and Lonnie. He wouldn't be caught or even suspected, because he'd make it look like the Son of Satan killer had struck again. He bought the carving knives at a cut-rate hardware store in Los Angeles, the candles at an occult bookshop out in Glendale. The devil mask, the purchasing of which would've probably made somebody suspicious, he swiped from a costume shop he used to patronize back when he was doing his show.

Beans didn't feel he'd have much trouble bringing himself to kill

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either of them. After all, he'd done a lot of fairly violent things in his time, back in the days when he was on booze and pills. He had himself one hell of a motive, too. Not only were Juliet and her lover trying to steal his very past from him, they were on the verge of botching up the best chance he'd ever had for a comeback. Nope, he was dead sure he could knife them both and leave a message in blood on the wall afterwards. Nothing to it.

To make absolutely certain he was in the proper nasty mood, Beans decided to have a few drinks before driving out to San Amaro to get rid of all his problems.

That may be why things went the way they did.

At any rate, at a few minutes before nine Beans dumped all his Son of Satan props into a cardboard box and hopped into the borrowed Mercedes. He set the box on the front passenger seat beside him and drove on up to Sunset.

"The decline and fall of the West is commencing right here," he murmured to himself as he turned onto the gaudy Strip. "Hookers and hustlers by the yard."

An ebony sportscar cut in front of him and came to a sudden dead stop alongside a gaggle of six or seven young women in shorts and high heels who were congregated in front of a club called Yellow Fever.

Beans hit the brakes, yelling, "Conduct your business elsewhere, gumball!"

He smashed right into the tail of the black sportscar.

The driver was a tanned man of thirty-one. He leaped free of his car and came charging back toward Beans. "You old coot, why in the bloody blue blazes don't you watch—?"

"Me? Listen, you ding-a-ling gumball," boomed Beans, climbing clear of his car, "in my day, hookers and their Johns did business behind closed doors."

"How'd you like to pick your choppers up off the asphalt, Granpappy?" inquired the young man, waving a tanned fist near Beans' nose.

"A sawed-off beach bum like—? Hey, sis, get the hell out of there!"

A very pretty young blonde, possibly mistaking Beans for a potential customer, had slid into the car by way of the door closest to the sidewalk. Giggling, she was poking around in his cardboard box. Just as she held up the devil mask, two uniformed cops drove up, stopped, and eased out of their patrol car.

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"What's the frumus all about, folks?" asked the younger one. He looked just exactly like a TV cop—blond, tan, handsome, and grim.

"Nothing, officer," said the sportscar driver. "This old gentleman and I are friends and we simply stopped to exchange a few pleasant words."

Beans wasn't paying attention to the conversation. He was watching the girl stumble out of the car with the crimson mask in one hand and the set of carving knives in the other.

Both policemen saw her now.

The older officer asked, "Who does that stuff belong to?"

The girl, whose face was pale now, said, "Him. The old guy."

"Mind if we ask you a few questions, sir?" asked the younger cop.

Shaking his head, Beans moved toward the Mercedes. "Let's just forget the whole thing," he suggested over his shoulder.

"Halt, sir," ordered the young cop.

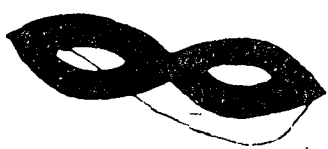
"It's him!" decided his partner. "It's the Son of Satan! We got him!"

Angry, Beans spun around to face the cops. "Don't either of you gumballs know who I am?" He started to reach inside his coat for his wallet full of pictures.

"He's going for a gun!"

Both policemen fired at him. The older cop hit him once in the stomach. His handsome partner got Beans twice in the chest.

As I said, they realized their mistake after a day or so—but it was too late to do Beans much good. Juliet was already giving him his fancy sendoff.



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A letter from a woman named Katherine to her husband of fourteen years, whose name just happens to be John . . .

DEAR JOHN

by HENRY T. PARRY

I remember you used to laugh when you told about old buddies in the Army who got "Dear John" letters from their wives or sweethearts saying everything was over between them. This is your "Dear John" letter, to tell you everything is over between us. I have decided to file for divorce.

The first reason is that I don't love you any more. I wonder now if I ever did, and, if I did, how it was possible. I was twenty-one when we were married, and I see now that I was more in love with the idea of love than I was with you. But that isn't unusual—many young girls with their heads in the clouds (and Shakespeare's sonnets tucked under their arms) have done the same thing and it has turned out for the best. That was fourteen years ago, and in that time we have grown apart. That's a cliché but I've found that the serious things in life are always expressed in clichés because the experience being described has happened so often.

At any rate, you were transferred up here—the big increase in the popularity of skiing offered tremendous opportunities to your company, you said. I had to give up teaching and there wasn't anything in that line up here that was available to me. Also, you objected when I wanted to take that part-time job at the Book Fair, saying that my place was at home. Whatever you meant by that.

Then you were away so much. Not only to other ski places—that I could understand as part of your job—but you were gone on hunting trips—several every fall. And on fishing trips. I never knew it was possible to fish all year until we bought the cottage on Squam Lake and you took up fishing through the ice. It occurs to me now that you spent a good part of every year killing something.

What I wanted, John, was companionship, somebody who would listen to my ideas and would talk about them with me. I can't be

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satisfied with a six-pack and a TV screen the way you are when you're at home. Well, it's a relief to know that I no longer will have to listen to your stories of what you killed and how you killed it, or to your accounts of the interminable holes of golf you played with your salesmen friends.

Above all, there was Richard. Although you would never admit it, I know our son was a disappointment to you. You always said he took after me, that he always had his head in a book. It's difficult for me to write about him, as I suppose it would be difficult for you to read about him. But I don't think I'll ever know a day when I don't think of him, don't see him coming in from school and throwing his books on the kitchen table, or hear the thumping of a basketball out by the garage. I see now that it was Richard's future, rather than our own, that kept us together. When he took that outboard out on Squam that afternoon I wanted to stop him, but you insisted he should try it on his own, that he would have to learn. There's no use going on about it, but I keep saying inside me: he would be ten next month.

Now I come to another reason for this letter. John, I am in love with someone else. His name is Mark. I met him on the ski slopes above Snow Eagle Inn. I'd been in the house alone for so long that I simply had to get out. It isn't jealousy, I find, that eats the heart—it's loneliness. I was having trouble with the bindings of my skis when this man, in his early forties I guessed, with a long face and kind eyes, offered to help me. When he had fixed them, he didn't try to scrape up a conversation—just waved his hand when I thanked him and shuffled over to the takeoff point. We went down the slope near each other. He was an excellent skier and I suspected he was holding back so as to stay near me. We were the only people there, so it seemed natural to walk back up the hill together—they don't have the lift working in the middle of the week. He told me a little about himself. He's a geologist working for some government department and is up here on some study or other, measuring background radioactivity in granite or something like that.

Later on, when we knew each other better, he told me that he put in for as much field work as he could get because since his wife died he preferred to keep moving. He comes originally from Virginia and got his doctorate at Cal Tech. Although he didn't ask at the time, I told him a little about myself: that I was married, a housewife with no children, a former teacher.

A week later he called and asked if you and I wouldn't join him

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for dinner. I explained that you were away—I didn't tell him you were always away—and that it was kind of him to think of it. He hesitated, and then he asked if I would like to come anyway.

He picked me up in one of those little foreign cars you make fun of and we went to Snow Eagle Inn. It was a Thursday, so they didn't have the weekend ski crowd yet. I know you dislike the Snow Eagle because it's full of kids up for the skiing, but I like to see them, they're so young and full of high spirits and hope, though they're far too sophisticated to admit it. To remember that once we were as hopeful as they are makes me sad.

We had a wonderful dinner, with wine, although I drank only one glass and Mark only half a glass. We talked and talked, as if some sort of conversational dam had suddenly let go. I felt as though I were twenty-one again but not nearly so wise and poised as I thought I was when I was actually that age. I know you're not going to understand, John, but I felt that my life suddenly had so many possibilities, that I had come through some dark narrow pass and was in smiling, open country.

I sound like a schoolgirl and I can hear what you would say—I'm still old-fashioned enough to be slightly shocked when you use that word. You'd also say I was repressed, living in a fantasy world. Maybe so, but right now I have never felt so free. Mark and I talked until Eddie Connolly, the manager, came over and said they had to close the dining room and there was a good fire going in the Ski Lift Room even though it was empty—why didn't we go over there?

That was how it began, back in December. Now it's the middle of March and the winter will soon be over. Mark didn't urge me to get a divorce. He said it was something you and I would have to decide, but if that was the way it came out he wanted to marry me.

Another thing. In the last three months, as we got to know each other, I would ask him to come in when he brought me home, but he refused, saying that he regarded the house as my place and your place and that he had no right here under the circumstances. I doubt if you appreciate such a sensitive distinction.

It's quiet here in the kitchen where I'm writing this. It's warm. *I* am quiet and warm. This is a sad and painful letter, yet I've never written one that came easier. I've never felt so much at peace with myself, or so sure of myself and of what I was doing. And of what I have done.

To go on—I must now confess an act that is unworthy of me. I found your address book and I spied on you. I've known about you

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and that woman since last spring. But I never saw the two of you together until tonight. This afternoon, Art Johnson from company headquarters called you here. I told him you were visiting the Coast plant for two weeks. He said no, that visit had been rescheduled for next month and you had told them you were taking some vacation. He then realized he had blundered into an embarrassing situation and began backing away with talk about how maybe Old John probably wanted to get in a little ice fishing on the sly, and so forth.

Thinking that Art may have guessed right, I filled the gas tank and drove up to the cottage on Squam. It was dark when I got there, but with the full moon and so much snow there was no trouble seeing. Your car was at the end of the lane, where you had to leave it because of the snow. I parked and walked in, following your footsteps.

The thaw had begun to set in and the snow was melting from the spruces. From nowhere that lake-country jingle came to my mind: When the spruce begins to drip/Then the ice will start to rip.

When I saw the cottage was dark, I thought you might have left in some other car, but then I saw a gleam of light from your fishing shelter out on the ice in the middle of the cove. It looked lonesome and desolate out there miles from anywhere, with no other lights and the snow-covered hills coming down to the lake's edge—hills that made our cove such a private place. It was even more private now, with the winter locking everything in. And out.

I went down the slope to the dock and saw that you hadn't snapped the padlock on that metal locker you've got fastened to the dock flooring. I pulled up the lid, and when I saw what was in there it came to me what I must do. It was as if my mind was a screen on which you show slides. One moment it's blank and the next it's full of the picture. I took what I saw out of the locker and walked out on the ice toward the fishing hut. The ice was clear of snow and sticky under my feet. From time to time I could hear the cracks and groans that come when the ice is about to break up although not just yet. I walked quietly because the night was still and you would have heard any unusual noise.

When I got closer to the hut, I counted to ten between each step. The door was on the other side and on the side facing me was the little window. I never thought of what might happen if you should catch me spying on you. I was now so close I could distinguish the rough, weatherbeaten boards of the shelter. I took one final slow careful step up to the window.

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There you were in the lantern light, the two of you. You were sitting on a tarpaulin and an old sleeping bag that were set down beside a hole in the ice, your backs resting against the wall, the window in the wall on your left, the door in the wall on your right, earphones clamped to your heads, listening to a portable cassette player. With those covering your ears, I could have approached trailing the tin cans from a bridal couple's car and you wouldn't have heard me.

I knew what you were listening to as well as if I could hear it. A country music song, with a melody similar to ten thousand other such songs, in which a man or girl is sitting in a bar moaning about how he or she betrayed him or her and now it's time to git back on down the road. (It has often occurred to me that the male characters featured in these songs may have served as role models for you.) I didn't see any fish lying about. You were taking occasional sips from a bottle and she, incredibly, was doing her nails.

The inside of that hut was as bleak and miserable a place as anyone could imagine. But here I was, outside in the cold, and inside were the two of you. The thought came to me again, as it has so often, that two or more people together is the best furnishing a room can have.

I moved around to the door side and wondered what would have happened if I pulled the door open and walked in and sat down on the other side of that black hole in the ice. What would you have said? Sorry, this tape player only provides two pair of earphones? And *she?* How do you like this shade of nailpolish? I reached out to open the door—the one you salvaged when we had the bathroom remodeled—but then I knew that confronting you would solve nothing. Instead I would do what I'd resolved to do when I raised the lid of the locker on the dock.

Afterward, I walked back to the shore, up the slope past the cottage, and stopped to look back at the ice grey cove, the dark woods, and the distant level stretches of the frozen lake. For minutes I stood there, hearing the drip from the spruces and calmly watching the light from your fishing hut. Then I went back along the lane to the road and drove home.

It was about ten-thirty when I arrived here and heard the phone ringing. I knew it was Mark, and that he had probably been trying to reach me all evening. Much as I wanted to talk to him, I wanted more to be alone and think.

It was then that I started this letter.

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Now you know that our marriage is ended. And why.

Katherine

P.S. I have read this over and decided that I haven't given quite an accurate picture of the man who wants to marry me. First of all, his name shouldn't be Mark. I shall call him Steve. And it shouldn't be the ski slopes where we met. It will have to be someplace like the supermarket, where we will meet by accidentally bumping into each other's shopping carts. With him he will have a boy of ten or so who will look like Richard.

Now I really must stop. Someone is knocking at the door and it sounds urgent. It's easy not to answer the phone, but to ignore the door is more than I'm capable of. But now that I have accomplished so much, I feel more capable than I have felt for a long time.

I feel that you bear a great deal of responsibility—all of it, in fact—for what happened tonight. You shouldn't have left that locker unlocked so that anyone could get at that can of reserve gasoline you keep there. You should have known how simple it would be for me to pour it on the door and the walls of the hut and then retreat to a safe distance and toss into the fumes an address book with its pages afire.

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a ***NEW*** Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

Have you a favorite Ambrose Ganelon among the four generations of Ganelons who have been introduced to you in these pages over the past thirteen years? Ambrose Ganelon I, oboe-playing founder—in 1840—of The Agence Ganelon on San Sebastiano's rue Blondin, whose wood-sounds fall sweetly on the ears of law-abiding citizens but set the Underworld's teeth on edge? Ambrose Ganelon II, who took over the agency in 1881, author of classic works on pathology and criminal psychology as well as a number of handbooks of a more practical nature—A Policeman's Guide to Human Hair, *for example, and* Footprints and What They Tell Us?

Or Ambrose Ganelon III, who brought a new style to the agency, combining the mental powers of his predecessors with a rough-and-tumble approach to detection? Or his son, Ambrose Ganelon IV, who, at the age when most children are just learning to read, stood at his grandfather's knee and broke the Italian naval code?

We've yet to settle on a favorite but must confess a partiality for Ambrose Ganelon I, who in the story you are about to read has agreed to endure a jarring Russian Winter away from the warm Mediterranean waters of the sun-drenched Principality in order to be inducted into the Imperial Society of Amateur Woodwind Virtuosi . . .

THE MEANDERING PEARL

by JAMES POWELL

The single chandelier glowing at the head of the long dining-room table gave intimacy to the meal. So did the Russian wind that buffeted the windows to remind them it was December outside.

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Their host, General Maxim Rostoki, had placed Ambrose Ganelon on his right. The great detective would have preferred the lesser place of honor on the left, where his bodyguard Sergeant Lucas sat, for it was closer to the tall blue-and-green porcelain stove. But he knew his chill wasn't physical. It lay across his heart. His worst fears seemed about to be realized.

A large man with grey side-whiskers and a bald head, General Rostoki had talked incessantly throughout the meal as if to avoid having to explain why he'd asked the detective to make the frozen odyssey from St. Petersburg to his country estate. Over the caviar, raw herring, pickled mushrooms, and vodka he spoke of hunting. While Mischa, his batman, served the herring and cucumber soup and sterlets boiled in wine the General discussed dogs. During the mutton stuffed with kasha and the sturgeon pie, his subject was hunting dogs. Ganelon let Lucas, the scourge of the Mediterranean hares in the fields around San Sebastiano, carry the light burden of response.

Ganelon seldom accepted social invitations. Like doctors and lawyers, he found that too frequently he was expected to pay for the meal, in his case by unraveling some family mystery or the unusual affair of the butler and the disappearing brandy. Tonight Ganelon would have been relieved if the matter at hand was something so trivial. But he feared otherwise. Ganelon had come to St. Petersburg to be inducted into the Imperial Society of Amateur Woodwind Virtuosi. This honor he had long secretly desired and no lesser one could have induced him to leave his sun-drenched Principality.

Rostoki, a clarinetist of some merit and secretary of the society, had actively promoted Ganelon's candidature. So the detective had reason to be grateful. But on the train trip from the capital, a dark and sharp-toothed possibility started to gnaw at the edge of Ganelon's thoughts. What if Rostoki had pushed for Ganelon's election just to get the detective to come to Russia and solve some mystery for him? Ganelon frowned. He had an oboist's distrust of clarinetists. They were single-reed men, after all, and only a step away from saxophone players.

The discussion of hunting dogs faltered. The silence deepened. Then Rostoki cleared his throat as though about to speak and lead the conversation in another, more important direction.

To postpone what he feared to hear, Ganelon spoke up first. "Tell us about Samarcand, General."

Rostoki's jaw dropped, taking Ganelon's innocent remark to mean

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the detective had somehow already deduced the matter at hand. The Victor of Samarcand quickly recovered himself and obliged the detective.

"The city stands on a fertile plain at the foot of Mount Chobanate," he began. Like many who delight in both the table and the battlefield, Rostoki was a master at recreating the second on the first. His gesture made the tablecloth the fertile plain and the high elaborately carved sideboard the mountain.

"Seen from afar," said the General, "its glittering minarets" (the silver cordial tantalus with its crystal bottles) "and lofty domed mosques" (the covered serving dishes) "present an imposing picture. And these stone edifices are relieved by the many gardens flourishing within the walls." Rostoki nodded at the flowering centerpiece and the remains of the salad. When he continued, the condiment dishes became the citadeled gates and the soup tureen the palace of the emirs. During his description of the siege, Lucas's shoulder served as the high ground from which the Russian artillery assaulted the walls, and the contents of a dish of toasted pumpkin seeds Rostoki's own cavalry regiment, the Iron Horse, in their final charge.

When Samarcand had fallen, Rostoki paused for a moment before turning to the detective and asking, "Are you aware of a large pearl called the Meanderer, Mr. Ganelon? It is part of the regalia of the Emirate. When Timur the Lame, whose tomb stands within the walls of Samarcand, wanted to find new worlds to conquer, they say he would cast the Meanderer on the ground and go in the direction it rolled. The pearl measures almost two inches and weighs twelve hundred grams. Its rococo shape must have added interest to Timur's casting. In any event, this priceless pearl was presented to me by my master the Tsar following my taking of the city."

"And this pearl has been stolen?" demanded Ganelon.

The General stood up without answering. "Perhaps we could take our coffee and brandy in the conservatory," he said. He lit a candle from the chandelier and led the way from the dining room, leaving Mischa to follow with the coffee and brandy.

"Flowers were my mother-in-law's passion," said the General, escorting them down the hallway. "The Princess was a fine, saintly woman who took a great liking to me when I was courting her daughter. She did what she could to advance my cause." They turned down a narrow corridor leading to the back of the house. "I was devoted to her. When she asked to be buried facing the conservatory, which she loved so much, I saw to the details. And I allow no one

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but myself to tend her burial plot, and plant it every spring with the flowers she loved."

Rostoki stopped where two doors stood on either side of the corridor. He chose the larger door on his right and unlocked it with a key from his key chain.

Two steps led down to the conservatory, a substantial room dressed in white marble. The broad windows curved up into the cupolaed roof, which was glass. Potted palms shared the walls with climbing plants and camelias. There were elaborate birdcages where bright finches and exotic long-tailed birds had their apartments, and an ornamental wicker gazebo filled with begonias. Clumps of sweet geraniums were at every turn. But all these had been pulled back from the broad carpet, which contained the equipment for a croquet game.

The General led his guests to a flowering bower and set them down at a table which held a thick-covered photographic album. "Mischa has his own key and tends to things here personally," he said. "But apart from him and myself and the team of Secret Police who searched the place, no one's been allowed in here or the sitting room across the corridor since—"

"Since the pearl was stolen?" repeated Ganelon.

"Stolen," admitted the General. "Or lost." Here he offered his cigar case. Ganelon selected a cigar, but Lucas preferred to smoke a cigarette. Rostoki and the detective lit their cigars carefully at the candle flame and then the General continued.

"You see, my wife was quite taken by the pearl. Not so much its value but the honor it represented. I was delighted that she wanted to wear it, for I suspected that in spite of my successes in the field I have cut less of a figure at court than she had hoped for. She is a proud daughter of Prince Tamarov, after all. This estate is only part of the dowry she brought with her when she chose to marry a mere cavalry captain fresh from the Hungarian wars, with a medal for valor from his Tsar.

"So she wanted to wear the pearl," he continued. "But how? The thing had never been pierced. And after all those hundreds of years I just couldn't bring myself to have that done. So I had it put into a gold pendant setting which she wore on a gold chain. But such settings are imperfect, particularly with something as heavy as the pearl. It dropped out on several occasions."

Here Mischa arrived with the coffee and the brandy decanter.

"Well, as you might imagine," said the General, watching the

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coffee being poured, "the pearl was not worn on casual occasions. Once we thought we lost it at a state dinner. But Mischa here found it on the floor of our carriage."

"Way back in the corner under a seat, sirs," said Mischa ominously. "As though hiding there."

"Another time," said the General, "while standing at the foot of the staircase in our St. Petersburg house waiting to escort my wife to an affair at the Winter Palace, I heard a thump, thump, thump, and the damned pearl came rolling right down the damned steps. It'd dropped from the setting as my wife turned back to give instructions to her maid. When the pearl reached the bottom of the steps it took a wide arc and headed for the open door to the garden. Meanderer, indeed! Before I picked it up, I had the distinct impression it knew exactly where it was going."

Here Rostoki dismissed his batman and sat in silence for a moment before continuing. "Perhaps someone else would have kept the damned thing under lock and key. But as I said, my wife delighted in displaying it on special occasions. I did urge her to be careful, for I was not unaware of the pearl's political value and the very special place it held in the imagination of the people of the province of Bokhara."

"And the special occasion was held here?" As he asked this, Ganelon rose and carried his cigar and brandy away from the table and candlelight to stand at a broad window and stare out into the night. The wind whipped across the surface of the moonlit snow and the muffled shape of a funereal monument with a rectangle of snow-capped balustrade. The Princess Tamarov's resting place, no doubt.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," said the General. "My wife's sister married the Grand Duke Constantine and they were frequent visitors here. Three months ago, they came to spend the weekend and were the guests of honor at a ball given by the local Marshal of Nobility to mark the end of the Fall season and the departure of everyone to St. Petersburg for the Winter.

"Do you know the Grand Duke? A most simple and congenial man with one consuming passion: photography. Cameras, tripods, and his old photographic assistant Monsieur Fromage follow him everywhere. During his visit, he intended to take some portrait photographs of my wife and her sister dressed out in their new wardrobes for the Winter season.

"While the ladies went about their lengthy changes, the Grand Duke also hoped to add to his collection of photographs of the sports

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and amusements of our time. He believes the future will regard us with a more indulgent eye if it sees us at play. To this end he requested that I arrange a game of croquet. Though we had already had our first frost, my daughter Raissa dutifully invited down some

"Unfortunately, the first significant snowfall of the season occurred the night before. It obliged us to move the game in here onto the carpet, with the hoops and stakes set up on stands as you see them. And because of the snow, only two of my daughter's guests could make the journey: Saltan Bey, the son of the Emir Muzatter-Eddin of Bokhara whom I had personally sponsored for admission into the Corps de Pages, and Lord Hilary from the British Embassy, a young man of considerable fortune—and, I am told, a promising career in the diplomatic. This was to be his farewell visit, for he had just been posted to Afghanistan. Lord Hilary was also an accomplished croquet player, who used a custom-made ivory mallet. Both men, I might add, were disappointed rivals for my daughter's affection. There was little love lost between the two of them. To make up the game, I was obliged to ask Madame Samuel, my daughter's old governess and my wife's before her, to fill in.

"But to get back to the story, the Grand Duke established a camera in the sitting room across the hall from the conservatory. He set up another here and alternated between the two.

"Meanwhile, I was going over papers in my study with my aide Lieutenant Malakov, who would have preferred being part of the croquet game. And when it comes to that, I could have spared him—but I chose not to. He was a fine boy, Malakov, and I loved him like a son, but he had become infatuated with my daughter. An intolerable situation. I told him as much. He was an honorable young man and should have known he had neither the rank nor the wealth to aspire so high."

This last remark offended Ganelon's democratic sensibilities. "His situation sounds much like your own when you married the daughter of the proud and wealthy Prince Tamarov," he observed.

The General received this remark without embarrassment and finished refilling their brandy glasses before replying. "No, that's not true. I was a soldier with a soldier's future. One war behind me and more on the way. Glory and advancement. Poor Malakov was a soldier in peacetime. I would have been less than frank if I hadn't pointed this out to him." In a voice of mild bewilderment the General added, "Besides, Raissa had asked me to discourage his suit. She liked Malakov but did not love him. These modern women and their

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love, Mr. Ganelon. She'd also rejected offers of marriage from Saltan Bey and from Lord Hilary on the same grounds. Her heart was not something to be won on the battlefield, in the counting house, or by an Emir's pedigree."

"An extraordinary woman, your daughter," said the detective.

Rostoki took gruff pleasure in Ganelon's words.

"Saltan Bey and Lord Hilary accepted her refusals with good grace. But Malakov remained sick with love. So there we were working in the study with the hall door open and my wife and her sister in their silk and satin comings and goings up and downstairs in their new finery. As she came back from the final photograph, my wife stopped to inform me that it was time for me to return to entertaining the Grand Duke. She was wearing a pink-and-lace ball gown with a train of the kind which must be picked up and carried over the wrist when dancing. But the first thing I saw was the empty setting dangling from the chain around her neck . . . Well, Malakov, my wife, and I hurried back down the hallway, checking the rug and under the furniture every inch of the way. In the empty sitting room we got down on our hands and knees and searched everywhere for the pearl. My wife swore she was wearing it when she arrived to be photographed in her ball gown. And she was right."

Here Rostoki opened the photographic album on the table at a place marked by a piece of paper. "Look here," he said. "The Grand Duke always sends us a copy of every photograph he takes on his visits. The good ones as well as the bad. Look here."

The four photographs on the page were views of a pair of elegantly dressed women in similar ball gowns. In the first they were posed side by side, the large pearl hanging on the chain identifying Rostoki's wife. And there it was again when she posed with her sister standing behind her. Then they changed positions and the pearl vanished from view. In the final photograph where they stood facing each other, the pearl was no longer in its setting.

Rostoki shut the album. "So the damned thing fell out in the sitting room," he declared. "But where had it gone to? According to my wife, when the Grand Duke was done with them he hurried back to the croquet game, leaving Monsieur Fromage to gather up the accessories and follow after him. My wife and her sister spoke together for a minute or two, then the Grand Duchess went across to the conservatory because she had promised to show her ball gown to Saltan Bey who was obliged to return to St. Petersburg that evening. My wife could not accompany her. We were always careful

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never to wear the Meanderer in that young man's presence lest it cause him pain as a symbol of his people's annexation into the Russian Empire."

Ganelon took up the album and found the first croquet-game photograph. On the left, Raissa Rostoki, a black-haired, black-eyed young beauty chewed her lip and addressed her ball. In the middle, Madame Samuel, whose ball was in danger of being hit and croquetted, watched apprehensively. The turbaned young man on the far right was, of course, Saltan Bey. "And this languid whey-faced young man by the steps is Lord Hilary?" asked Ganelon. The General nodded. "And why does that name ring a bell?" asked the detective.

"A Year Among the Wily Pathan," replied the General.

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed Ganelon thoughtfully. A few years awhile back, this Lord Hilary had been part of a small British expedition sent into Afghanistan to treat with the Khan in Kabul. They had been hit by Pathan raiders almost as soon as they passed beyond the Khyber. The others were killed. The wounded Lord Hilary was made captive and over a period of months brought to a Pathan assembly point where captives were collected to be sold into slavery.

Lord Hilary's narrative of his adventures had been of special interest to Ganelon because it presented the first published word picture of his archrival, the evil genius Dr. Ludwig Fong, whose very existence the great detective had never been able to get the authorities to admit to. Unfortunately, except for Fong's ominous arrival at the head of a force of fierce horsemen wearing black-fur capes and riding beneath a dark banner, the villian was portrayed as a charming samaritan who spoke kindly to Lord Hilary in the slave pen and then bought his freedom and his passage back to the British.

"All right, there we were," continued the General. "No one had come in or out of the sitting room during the photographic session. The door was closed. So the pearl couldn't have rolled out into the hall. Who had taken it? Certainly not the Grand Duke and Duchess. That left only one person: old Fromage. With this conclusion a terrible fear stirred within me. What if the man was in the hire of Saltan Bey, who intended to use the pearl to raise mischief among his people. He was a brave and intelligent boy, but of a devious turn of mind, and since his graduation he had been involved in several shadowy groups on the edge of intrigue in the capital.

"I hurried to the conservatory," said the General. "Telling Raissa and Madame Samuel that my wife wasn't feeling well, I ordered

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them to take her upstairs to join her sister. My daughter is not a suspect, Mr. Ganelon. I know her too well. And we consider Madame Samuel a member of the family. So taking the Grand Duke aside, I asked his permission to search his assistant immediately, citing a possible threat to the integrity of the Empire. I had hoped the man had not yet had the chance to pass off the Meanderer to anyone. In fact, the man proved eager to clear himself. In a whisper I ordered Malakov not to let Saltan Bey or Lord Hilary leave the conservatory. Then the Grand Duke and I took Fromage back to my study where we searched him thoroughly.

"No pearl.

"Now consider my dilemma. Saltan Bey and Lord Hilary were my guests, one the representative of the British government, the other the son of the Emir of Bokhara, who if now only a mere vassal of the Tsar was still the titular leader of a proud and hot-tempered people. How could I ask these men to allow themselves to be searched like common criminals? The Grand Duke saw my problem and resolved it by striding back into the conservatory. 'Gentlemen,' he announced, 'the famous pearl called the Meanderer is missing. While I am certain it has only been lost, my honor as a gentleman requires me to insist that I be searched.' "

The General gave a grim smile. "This was a Grand Duke speaking. The others were obliged to insist that they be searched as well. Now understand, the last thing I wanted was a scandal. I wasn't interested in uncovering a thief. I only wanted to make whoever it was to drop the pearl where I would find it later.

"Leaving Malakov to watch the other two, I took the Grand Duke to the study and searched him. And let me tell you, the Romanov crest on his linen was daunting even to an old soldier like myself. Then I returned to the conservatory and fetched Lord Hilary. My choice here was quite deliberate. Saltan Bey must feel the noose tightening.

"The Grand Duke and I searched Lord Hilary without success. Then I returned to the conservatory. Locking the door behind me, I escorted Saltan Bey and Malakov back to the study. We searched Saltan Bey. He did not have the pearl. Then Malakov insisted that he be searched as well. Nothing.

"Well, of course I offered my deepest apologies to everyone. But in my heart I was pleased, certain that I would now find the pearl in the conservatory under a chair or what have you. But the Meanderer was not there.

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"After dinner we drove Saltan Bey to the railroad station and while there I sent a telegram to a friend in the Third Section. Early the next morning a secret police team skilled in such matters searched the conservatory, the sitting room, the Grand Duke's photographic equipment, and anything else they could think of. Nothing."

While Rostoki talked, Ganelon had been paging through the album and scrutinizing some of the photographs with his pocket glass. Now he looked up and asked, "And there is no other way in or out of the conservatory except through that one door?"

"None," said Rostoki.

"And what is that for?" Ganelon indicated a ten-foot pole with a hook leaning in a corner.

Rostoki pointed into the darkness above them. "To open and close the ventilation louvres at the base of the cupola. How could a thief have opened them unobserved? And if he did, what good would it have done? Could a man standing down here throw the pearl through a narrow louvre ten feet over his head?"

When Ganelon did not reply, the General continued his story. "A week after his stay with us, Saltan Bey vanished from St. Petersburg society only to reappear at the head of an uprising in Bokhara amid rumors that the Meanderer had returned home to its people. This rumor was reinforced by the fact that my wife could not appear in public wearing the pearl. The best we could do was send her and my daughter to spend the Winter with the Russian colony in Florence. A feeble subterfuge."

Rostoki gave a disheartened sigh. "And of course Malakov begged me to let him transfer to an active regiment on its way to Bokhara to put down the uprising. After what I'd been preaching to him I could hardly refuse. He arrived there a month ago. Last week I received word he'd been killed in the assault on Kadem. He has been awarded the Alexander Medal for Valor posthumously."

On this sad note the General's story ended. He looked inquiringly at the photographic album where the detective had inserted three fingers as bookmarks. "Can you shed any light on this mystery, Mr. Ganelon?"

"As to how your pearl meandered out of the sitting room, we'll have no problem there," said Ganelon. He opened the album at a photograph the Grand Duke had taken when his wife interrupted the croquet game to show her ball gown to Saltan Bey. There she was striking an elegant pose on the top step just inside the doorway

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with her green-silk train swirled artistically at her side. Atop the train sat an unmistakable white oval: the Meanderer.

"The pearl fell from its setting and onto the silk train when your wife was posing behind her sister. It was still there when the Grand Duchess went across the hall and into the conservatory. As she turned to go back upstairs, the pearl fell from the moving train and rolled down onto the carpet where the croquet game was being played. Apparently only one person noticed. A quick-thinking fellow who saw a possible profit in it."

Ganelon turned to the next photograph, which showed the other croquet players looking on while Lord Hilary made a difficult Irish stroke with his ivory mallet. General Rostoki took up the album. "But I don't understand. I see no pearl."

"Note Lord Hilary's stance," said Ganelon. "You said he was an expert croquet player. But look at that terrible form. For the Irish stroke the feet should be spread apart, but parallel, so the stroke can be taken between the legs. See how awkwardly his right foot is held far back like that. Could that foot be covering something he didn't want seen?"

"Why would a wealthy man like Lord Hilary steal the pearl?"

Ganelon stared at the young man in the photograph with his pocket glass. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"I wish I could look into those eyes and see what Fong saw that caused him to ransom Lord Hilary from the Pathan slave pen. High ambitions and no scruples about how he achieved them? Perhaps. One thing is for sure, Fong is no philanthropist. But he's always ready to act so that evil might not perish from the earth. You said Lord Hilary had been posted to Afghanistan. The Meanderer could stir up trouble right next door. Such unsettled political situations are for an ambitious diplomat what wars are for a glory-seeking soldier."

"You're not suggesting Lord Hilary would try to lead an uprising in Bokhara?"

"Of course not," said Ganelon. "But Saltan Bey could and did."

He opened the album at the third photograph. Lord Hilary's awkward stance had indeed caused him to miss both hoop and opponent's ball and lose his turn. Madame Samuel had skillfully laid her ball up against his. The camera caught her as she was about to croquet it out of bounds.

The other participants had turned to watch her, including Lord Hilary, who had moved a good four feet from his former position and

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stood with his back to the camera. The pearl was nowhere in evidence. But the far edge of the photograph had been marred by Saltan Bey. His mallet was blurred as though he had just used it to rake something toward him along the carpet. And under closer examination, the top of a white oval could be seen peeking from behind the tip of his shoe.

"When no one was looking, Lord Hilary kicked the pearl back to Saltan Bey—is that what you're saying?" demanded General Rostoki. "I can't believe it. Those two men hated each other!"

"As you said, the pearl had no value to Lord Hilary," said Ganelon. "Unless he could tempt Saltan Bey to make use of it."

"But why didn't we find the pearl when we searched Saltan Bey?"

"Once the pearl's absence had been discovered and the Grand Duke insisted on being searched, the young man realized he couldn't carry off the pearl. But after thinking about it for a bit, he realized that he didn't have to. All he had to do was arrange so that you couldn't produce it to contradict his story that he had it. Proof enough for those who wanted to be convinced that he did."

"Then he disposed of it in some way," said the General. "But how? Malakov was watching him like a hawk. His hatred for both his rivals was quite intense."

"My dear General," said Ganelon, "why can't people who hate each other work together when it's clearly in their mutual interest? Lord Hilary would profit from an uprising in Bokhara. Saltan Bey would like to lead that uprising. Your Lieutenant Malakov would like to earn glory putting that uprising down. All that was needed was for the pearl to disappear for a while."

Ganelon allowed the General to refill the brandy glasses before continuing. "Let us imagine the confrontation between Malakov and Saltan Bey after you led Lord Hilary off to be searched. Did Saltan Bey drop the pearl on the floor and pretend to find it? Or was he sure enough of his man just to pull the pearl from his pocket and pass it over? And think of Malakov's reaction when he saw the pearl and his smiling rival. He was a soldier and this was a battlefield challenge. By returning the pearl to you he would have refused that challenge and dishonored himself."

Rostoki grunted. "You mean he wasn't dishonoring himself by helping to steal the pearl?"

"I rather think Malakov saw himself as recovering your pearl for you," said Ganelon. "Though I grant you he wasn't going to return it right away."

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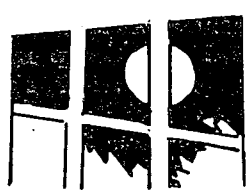
"But he met a hero's death," said Rostoki, raising his glass to toast the dead. "And now more will die because the pearl is lost to us forever."

"No," said Ganelon. "I think not. An honorable soldier would cover the possibility that he might die in battle. He had a plan that would require Saltan Bey's grudging cooperation. Where one man couldn't get to the ventilation louvres, one athletic young man balanced on another's shoulders might very easily. Malakov threw the pearl out through a louvre. But not any louvre. I wager that when the snow melts in the Spring and you go out to plant flowers in your revered mother-in-law's burial enclosure you'll find the Meanderer there."

Rostoki called for Mischa and ordered the servants to assemble with lanterns, shovels, and sieves. Then he looked down into his brandy glass. "A pearl in a snow bank," he said. "I rather like that. It has something Russian about it."

"I think we would prefer sapphires in warm Mediterranean waters, eh, Lucas?" said the detective.

"The sooner the better, sir," said the bodyguard earnestly.



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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Suddenly the Special Forces instructor was lecturing him from the past. "The trick of staying dry, gentlemen, is not getting wet in the first place, capeesh . . .?"

THE FEAR

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Thief-sly, it padded past Del Corner's defenses, insubstantial as an elusive memory, fragile yet deadly as the spines of some tropical fish that break at a touch to instill their poison.

The process started as soon as he left his home.

Charlene offered to drive him to the station.

At first sight, Del Corner was a *Saturday Evening Post* man, a Norman Rockwell man—healthy and clean-looking. A perpetual smile made him large without being imposing. Middle-age robbed his wide shoulders and heavy limbs of physical menace. As happened three or four days in every working week, he took his coffee to the window by the patio, checked, and said the weather would allow him to walk.

"And you need the exercise," his wife chanted. No sting in her tone. Like many women, she'd been enchanted by a young man of potential, done her level best to change him into a person whose existence she hardly acknowledged to herself—her long-dead father, perhaps, or an old love—and, when that failed to work, experienced disappointment that never soured into malice.

"Creature of habit," Del Corner mocked himself, speaking her thoughts,and touched Charlene's hair. A faintly crackling feel to it these days, instead of silkiness.

"Well, it's five after seven. That's what you *do* say then," she

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agreed, and they both laughed as she prodded his gut and added—for Charlene Corner had as many routines as her husband— "You certainly *do* need exercise."

In successful marriages, the overt meaning of the words often has little to do with their message. Del and Charlene had paid their dues, one way and another. She had been staunch in the bad time after Del returned from Nam. She had learned to slip out of bed when his nightmare began (always the same one), because holding him, waking him, even touching him, could bring disaster. His sweat soaked the sheets, during one bout he had smashed the headboard, but Charlene pretended nothing had happened.

As for Del, he had held on a few years later when Charlene was working at the U.N. and there was that thing with her Belgian boss.

"So walk," said Charlene, with a touch of impatience as she pushed him away and opened *The Times*.

There were no children, which they agreed was a fine thing, and Charlene worked from home, translating technical documents for an offshoot of the U.N. They were lucky, Del reflected. Enough money, the recession divided around them and flowed on past. A good life, in its way. Money given to charity, just because they had enough, paintings dutifully inspected, plays and concerts attended, books read.

Yes, a good life. *Except.*

Del Corner frowned the fragmentary thought away. That was how the fear began.

Suddenly the Special Forces instructor was lecturing him from the past. "The trick of staying dry, gentlemen, is not getting wet in the first place, capeesh?"

Del nodded unconsciously, pulling his shoulders back under the watery spring sun. Don't let the fear find a chink.

But the fear was very cunning, very patient, very alert. It took hold of a shred of emotion as Del Corner headed downhill. Wildfire Rise was grey-washed with palest green from the tentative foliage of the season, pretty and pastel and manicured. He found it hard to credit that in the Sixties he and Charlene had lived in Greenwich Village, his hair had been a fraction longer than hers, and ephemeral music had been the most important thing in their lives—that, and throwaway, cheaply potent lyrics, and sex.

Now if he caught a few bars of the Stones or the Beatles or Jefferson Airplane or even Janis, the sounds were clumsily obvious and

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seemed to have nothing to do with him any more. They'd lost most friends from that era, but Del knew what some of them would feel about living in the 'burbs, with subscriptions to book clubs and the rest.

Selling out, he thought with contempt, not for himself but for the imaginary critics. They didn't know. He'd done his selling out in Nam—everything else was trimmings. He had a right to quiet nights and clean streets and a modest quest toward grace and elegance.

Irritation made his stride lengthen, and the mile walk was over sooner than usual. At the station, a girl was dropping her husband from a crimson Porsche. She didn't look old enough to be married. Short skirt, long legs, nipples sharp against her shirt, looking through Del as she backed past him, pale honey hair shining. Close enough to touch.

Del squeezed his eyes shut for an instant. He didn't consider himself a particularly highly sexed man but something about the girl disturbed him—the way he could tell from her look that she still smelled of sleep, that against all reason the shape and presence of her breasts were momentarily imprinting on his palm.

Quit it, he told himself with a mixture of anger, shame, and wry amusement. Spring fever, the old Adam. . . . She'd looked right through him, uncaring, as if he wasn't a real man at all.

Now quit it, damn you. He turned back, crossed the street, and picked up the morning papers. Usually he got his head together during the hour-long journey to the city, shaping the day in advance. But suddenly he needed diversion, avoidance of thought.

The picture took most of the third page in, and his initial reaction was: I know that guy.

Almost before reading the caption, Del knew what it would say. An out-of-towner, a conference delegate, fifty-five years old, married with three children, beaten and stabbed to death. The police thought he'd taken an after-dinner stroll from his hotel, got lost, and blundered into bad territory where predators made everything, including a man's life, cheap and vulnerable.

Del folded the tabloid, thrusting it deep into a crevice of the seat. The figure in the picture could have been himself. And the fear was past his defenses, rampaging at will.

Young Doc, half the plant's medical unit, aimed the plastic spoon

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at Del. "The reason you can bank on not being crazy—pay attention, follow this—is that I've no compunction in saying you're crazy."

Del blinked at her. Young Doc really was young and might have been his daughter. *Old* Doc could have been his son, come to that. He wished she wasn't such a nice person, for the quality had eased him over a barrier of shame and reticence more than a year ago now, so that he confessed a fraction of the fear to her.

Thankfully, the executive restaurant had emptied. Trying to make it a joke, he grumbled, "That's no way to address a vice president, girl."

"You're full of it, boss. You look terrible, the cares of the world on your back. Something's spooked you again."

With a delicious sense of letting go, Corner folded slightly shaky hands, leaned forward, and said, "But it *could* happen, Joanie. That man . . . there was no *reason* for him to be where he was. You could look at his life style, read the probabilities, and say he'd never end up in an alley like that. But he did. Nobody is safe, nobody at all any more. Fate or accident or whatever could put any of us there."

Young Doc's pink lips set stubbornly. "There's no such thing as an accident. That visiting fireman was probably looking for action or just wanted to tell them back home that nobody tells Harry Hayseed where he can or can't go. Why would such a thing happen to you?"

He wanted to shout that fear needn't make sense—or that in his case it made far too much sense. But he had already told her more than was prudent. So he nodded, apparently convinced, and managed a sheepish grin. "You're right, of course. Now don't start that see-my-friend-she's-a-great-lady-and-you'll-love-her routine. I aim to make it all the way to retirement without the aid of a shrink."

"You will," Young Doc agreed instantly. "But with needless anguish is all I'm saying."

Four hours later Del remembered that claim. And her earlier remark about the impossibility of accidents.

Another cab swished by, roof light glowing but the driver determined to get out of the district.

Del, shivering, stepped back into the doorway.

It wasn't all accidental, him being here, he conceded sickly. There was an element of fascination, the impulse that makes people step gingerly to the safety rail and stare at some immense drop, imag-

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ining themselves falling, while their knees quiver and electric tingles race around their bodies.

The bar had been on safe ground, just. Hank Wills, who ran the Dallas operation, was in town to hassle the Research and Development men and, that accomplished, he virtually kidnaped Del and ran him across town to the Blazing Brand. Wills was a ruthless businessman, but he also suffered from the convivial delusion that every WASP male in North America had gone to college with him.

Normally, Del would have made an excuse and taken one swift drink with him, from the bar in his office. But the fear made him eager for company and high spirits. He phoned Charlene. "I've got a problem, a Hank Wills problem, dear."

Wills chortled and blew a kiss at the phone.

"It'll do you good, right down to the hangover," Charlene approved. "Give him my love and don't tell him how glad I am that you two are there and I'm here. Listen, I'll sleep downstairs tonight—see you in the morning."

So they'd gone to the Blazing Brand— "Best chile and country music in Manhattan, which ain't saying much, old horse, but it'll have to do."

Del hated chile, it always seared his palate and left him with the thirst of a shipwrecked mariner on his third waterless day. "That's the idea," Wills snorted. "I swear, Del, you're not the brightest dude I ever met."

Several drinks later, Wills came back from a mysterious prowl to the far end of the room with a sinuous redhead on his arm, hollow of cheek and hard of eye. "Daisy here says she has a friend, and the pair of them have more ideas for passing time than this child can rightly calc'late."

Del gave Daisy a polite smile. "She's a hooker, Hank," he murmured.

Wills hugged his discovery. Equally quietly, he repeated, "You're not the brightest, horse. Are you on?"

"Not really," said Del. "But have a good evening."

Alone, he found himself in an odd mood. His brain chattered, tags of songs, corny jokes, rude comments on other drinkers. But he wasn't high. More a matter of playing drunk to an audience of one, himself.

Out on the sidewalk sweat chilled his brow and cheeks. He was mildly startled to see it was fully dark, around nine at night. Still

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two more trains home, though, and the terminal was only a five-minute ride from here.

But he stayed where he was, just to one side of the bar's canopy. It was a frontier of sorts, where Eighth Avenue changed nature abruptly. Here, the sidewalk was clear, the Blazing Brand's window-glass clean enough to act as a mirror. Down the next block, garbage bags and resting derelicts made similar bulks in front of derelict stores.

Brazenly confronting the fear, Del realized that right now he could be that man in the newspaper photograph. Turn right and there were lights, walk only a few yards in the other direction and his life could be on the line. It was crazy to be so frightened, even at the thought.

Supposing he crossed to the next block? Just to prove that he could do it? Well, that *was* crazy. Of course he could, it was a free country. And the bar would be just across the street.

A cruising taxi pulled in at the curb. Del stared at the driver for a moment, dumbly shook his head, and received a disgusted curse and a taint of exhaust fumes as the cab zoomed to the opposite side of the avenue to pick up a laughing crowd of girls from another bar.

A couple who had just emerged from the Blazing Brand eyed Del curiously. Embarrassed, he smiled stiffly and walked away, anxious to display that he was neither drunk nor eccentric. See my measured tread, the straight line of progress. Afterward, he was certain he had walked a full block before understanding that he had turned left.

The fear sprang at him fully armed, triumphant—such an intense and consuming descent that for a split-second his panic was claustrophobic under a sense of being stifled. This was feral territory, hunters' territory. He stopped and swung around. The couple outside the Blazing Brand were still there, twin moons of faces turned toward him. He pretended to check his watch. Fear or no, he was literally unable to go back and endure their interest.

But light spilt from what seemed to be a pharmacy or deli on the next block. He could wait there and grab a cab. He hurried toward it and then his heart sank because the place was closed and empty, strip lights glaring down on an interior littered with drop cloths, stepladders, and cans of paint.

His mouth was feverishly dry, his throat hurt—his heart, having twitched, was thumping erratically. Get back to the Blazing Brand, wailed a voice in his brain. *You should be there now.*

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Then he saw them. Three men on the far side of the avenue, staring over. They were crossing now.

Del knew that they could cut him off if he went back the way he had come. Or they could switch direction and head him off if he went on down the avenue.

There was an alley beside the closed store, horrifyingly narrow and dark, but with a glint of passing traffic at the far end. Del ran, though he had planned to save face by merely walking quickly.

Halfway along, his foot snagged a pothole and he felt pain at the heel of his hand as he fell. He stayed down long enough to take a deep breath, crouching, one knee bent. *There's no such thing as an accident.*

Mechanically, jarred back toward the animal, he sucked the lacerated base of his thumb, heedless of the taste of blood and grime. The fear had changed nature now, a numbing influence that made everything unreal, dreamlike. When he stood up, the trio waited no more than a pace away.

Fast, he thought drearily, they chased me so fast. Aloud he said, "Please. Leave me alone. Please."

He couldn't understand what they were saying, but the tone came through: pleasure and excitement. The roaring in his ears stopped as though cut by a switch, leaving a thin whistle. "—cut you." He heard that all right.

"No, please, keep away from me," he said, understanding, even as he whined, that the entreaty was heartening them. But though part of him screamed for silence he couldn't stop. "Please, please. . . ."

One of them moved in. Light on a knife, rapid movement, sound of flesh on flesh, a gasping squeal with an obscene quality of surprise and startlement.

"You look terrible," said Charlene.

"I fell down."

"That's Hank Wills for you."

"He left early, and I wasn't that drunk. If at all." Del Corner was a truthful man. "I think I'll take that ride to the station today, honey."

He might look terrible, he mused disgustedly, but he felt . . . *great.* His gorge rose. He put his head in his hands.

He'd never felt so alone, bereft, *dirty.* And even that was self-delusion, because the guilt, while its intensity forever surprised him, was familiar in a way. Familiar from the last time.

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At least the fear was banished for a little while. But its tendrils would unfurl and begin exploring his nature again quite soon.

He gagged, hastily giving his wife a wan smile and thumping his midriff to tell her the nausea was a mere hangover jab of sour stomach. Actually, he'd just realized that the intervals between the appearance of the fear were shortening.

Young Doc thought his phobia concerned victimhood, getting mugged and hurt. But no amateurs would ever get the better of him, not after Nam.

His real horror was simpler and impossible to confess. The fear that his need for violent release was growing as it fed. Once he had been afraid that he might not be able to stop decoying street raiders who dared not denounce him to the law.

Now he knew that he couldn't stop. The final threshold came closer all the time.

The hitting and the breaking was fine. No, it was superb. And he was only imagining that he enjoyed it less—beer instead of raw spirits for a hard drinker—these last few months.

"No, no," he mumbled, safe for the moment because Charlene had left the room. He would never need to kill one of those hunters, in the heady handful of seconds when the roles reversed and he surrendered to his needs. The fear welled up as the idea entered his mind. It filled Del Corner.

Because he wasn't sure.

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Reading certain stories of Clark Howard's is like listening to Aaron Copland (Billy the Kid, Rodeo, Appalachian Spring), *whose simple contrast of dissonance with traditional harmony gives his music such a distinctive American flavor—vigorous, deeply felt, echoing. As for the similarity in title between this story and the one that follows by William Bankier, we've lined them up this way on purpose. They arrived at our offices within a month of each other, and after reading them we decided to publish them back to back. It's at times like this it's such fun to be an editor . . .*

RETURN TO THE OK CORRAL

by CLARK HOWARD

The halfbreed boy, Kit, was the first one to see James Halloran when he arrived in Tombstone. Kit, who was twelve, was sitting with his shoeshine box in front of the Crystal Palace Saloon, trying to pick up a few quarters shining the shoes of tourists, when he saw the Bisbee bus stop in front of the Longhorn Restaurant. When the bus pulled away, Halloran was standing there in the hot Arizona sun, a slim, pale man with dark eyes and a full black moustache. He was wearing a wrinkled grey summer suit and white shirt but no tie, and carrying a battered, old-fashioned Gladstone suitcase.

Kit's eyes got wide and his mouth dropped open as he stared at the man. He watched Halloran look up and down Allen Street for a bit, then cross to the opposite corner and stand staring at the Tombstone T-Shirt Store, and finally walk across 5th right past Kit, and into the Crystal Palace.

Kit grabbed his shine box and dashed across Allen, barely missing

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being hit by a tourist car from New Jersey. He ran the long block down 5th to Toughnut Street, where 5th ended, ran down a gully and around an open stope, and hurried behind an old adobe building that had once been a firehouse but was now an art gallery. Back thirty yards behind that structure was a little two-room house, also adobe, in front of which a bearded old man sat rocking back and forth with his eyes closed, fanning himself with a straw fan that looked as old as he did. Kit ran up to the old man and dropped to his knees in front of him.

"Miner! Miner! I seen my great-granddad!"

The old man opened tired eyes. "What are you talking about, boy?"

"My great-granddad, Miner! He just got off the Bisbee bus! He's in the Crystal Palace right now!"

"Stop talking like a fool, boy," Miner said. "Your great-grandpaw died more'n ninety years ago."

"But, Miner," the boy said eagerly, "maybe he's come *back!* You and Shepherd Man said once that if a man left his spirit behind when he died, he might come back for it."

"*I* never said that," Miner protested, "that fool Shepherd Man was the one who said it. Crazy old Indian."

"But you agreed with him, Miner."

"I was drunk." He took Kit roughly by the arm. "Listen to me, boy. Dead men don't come back, understand? Dead is dead. Now go in the house and bring me my medicine."

"Yes, Miner," the boy said, hanging his head. He went into the cool dimness of the little adobe house and got a bottle of peach brandy from a shelf. As he started back out, he paused to look at an unframed picture tacked to the wall. A picture of a pale man with dark eyes and a full black moustache.

It's him, Kit thought. *I know it's him.*

Back outside, he handed the bottle to Miner. The old man pulled its cork stopper and took a long swallow.

"Miner?" the boy said hesitantly.

"What?" the old man asked impatiently.

"When he got off the Bisbee bus, he crossed the street and stood looking at the Tombstone T-Shirt Store for the longest time."

"Maybe he likes T-shirts," Miner growled.

"Maybe. But ain't the Tombstone T-Shirt Store where the Oriental Saloon used to be? And didn't you tell me that my great-granddad used to play cards a lot in the Oriental when it was owned by Lou Rickabaugh and Wyatt Earp?"

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"Sure, I told you that," Miner grudgingly admitted. "What of it?"

"Well, I just think it could be him, is all. He could be like Shepherd Man said: re-in—you know."

"Reincarnated."

"Yeah, Shepherd Man said—"

"Shepherd Man was a crazy old Apache!" Miner said testily. "Why, he was so crazy he even said once he knowed where Cochise was buried." Miner grunted derisively. "Don't *nobody* know where Cochise is buried." He shook a finger in Kit's face. "It's a good thing that old fool finally died. He filled your head with too much foolishness."

Kit looked down at the dirt porch, at the ruts in the ground made by the rockers of Miner's chair. There was another set of ruts nearby where Shepherd Man's chair had once sat. Miner and the boy had burned the chair out in the desert when they burned the old Indian's body.

"I don't think it's a good thing he died," Kit said quietly. "I miss Shepherd Man."

Old Miner stared into space for a moment, remembering his friend of fifty years. He had to blink back tears. Putting an arm around Kit's shoulders, he drew the boy close to him. "I miss him, too, " he admitted. He took another swallow of peach brandy, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and said, "Fetch the picture."

Kit quickly brought him the picture they had tacked to the wall. Miner stared thoughtfully at it. "You say the feller that got off the Bisbee bus looks like this picture?"

"Looks *just* like it," Kit swore, nodding his head up and down for emphasis.

"All right, we'll have us a look-see," the old man said. "Get me my walking stick."

The Crystal Palace Saloon still looked much the same as it had in 1880. A fifty-foot mahogany bar ran nearly the length of the room on the left, with a brass footrail bolted in front of it. Chandeliers that had been converted to electricity hung from the high ceiling. Polished round tables for four were spaced at intervals on the gleaming wooden floor. A single billiard table stood in back, just in front of a raised, red-curtained stage where dancing girls had once kicked high. The only thing that had changed was the customers; instead of gamblers, gunmen, and gold miners, they were now tourists in doubleknit pantsuits and walking shorts, with cameras hanging around their necks.

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Halloran, the man who had come in on the Bisbee bus, sat at the end of the bar nearest the billiard table, his suitcase at his feet, a shot glass in front of him. He noticed the boy and the old man with the cane when they came in, saw them nod a greeting to the bartender and sit at a table near him, but paid no further attention to them after that. He drank quietly for an hour, ignoring the tourists who wandered in, looked around, and wandered out. The only time he moved was to lift his glass to drink, or to hold it up as a signal for the bartender to refill it. During the time Miner and Kit watched him, he raised the glass five times.

"He drinks like they say your great-grandpaw drank, that's for certain," Miner whispered to the boy.

Around midafternoon, when the desert sun was its hottest and most of the tourists had continued on their way west to Tucson or east to El Paso, Halloran called the bartender over and said, "Where can I find a poker game in town?"

"Gambling's illegal in Arizona," the bartender replied.

"If I wanted to know the law I'd ask an attorney," Halloran said easily. "But when I want a card game I ask a bartender." He laid a ten-dollar bill on the bar. The bartender picked it up and put it in his shirt pocket.

"Down the street two blocks and around the corner on 3rd. Sippy's Real Estate. Fred Sippy usually has a game in there every night. I can't guarantee they'll let you play."

"I'll take my chances," Halloran said. "Where's the quietest motel in town?"

"Down the road about a quarter of a mile farther than Sippy's. It's up on a hill—called the Lookout. Right across the road from Boot Hill cemetery. You can't miss it."

The bartender poured him another drink and went back up the bar. Halloran had just downed the shot when he noticed that the kid and the old man at the nearby table were looking at him. They had been watching him off and on ever since they came in, and Halloran was a little tired of it. He turned around on his stool and faced them.

"Any particular reason you two have been staring at me?" he asked in a neutral voice.

"No offense, mister," said Miner. "The boy here thinks you look like his great-grandpaw. We wondered if you might be a distant relative of his."

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"I don't have any relatives," Halloran said, turning back to the bar. A moment later the old man and the boy got up and came over to him.

"Begging your pardon, mister," said Miner, "we don't aim to bother you none, but would you mind taking a look at this here picture?" He handed Halloran the photo he had brought along. "This gentleman was John Henry Holliday. Most people called him 'Doc' Holliday. He was pretty famous hereabouts. Him and Wyatt Earp was best friends. He was a dentist, Doc was, at one time. Are you, uh—you a professional man yourself, sir?"

"Used to be," Halloran said, "I was a veterinarian." His light-blue eyes seemed to turn dull. "But that was a while back," he added.

Miner nodded. "You sound like a Southerner. Doc, he was from Georgia. Might you be from there, too?"

Halloran shook his head. "Alabama. Sorry." He handed the picture back. "Like I said, I don't have any relatives."

Halloran picked up his suitcase and left the saloon. Kit stared after him, a look of conviction on his face.

"It's him, Miner," he said in a voice firm beyond its years. "I know it's him. I can *feel* it."

Within a week, Halloran became a regular player in Fred Sippy's nightly poker game in the office of his small real-estate firm. The other regulars were Lon Metzger, a pharmacist; Gordon Toole, who had a small printshop; Lyle Linden, a trailer-park owner; Sam Manley, who had a tourist gift shop; and Fred Sippy himself. When one of the regulars failed to show up, his chair was usually filled by someone else from around town who had a night out. It was a casual, friendly game, two-bits to open, half to bet, dollar to raise. On an average night, forty or fifty dollars might change hands. The men usually played from eight until midnight.

Halloran had moved into Room 120 at the Lookout. It was an end room that faced across the road to Boot Hill. When he had first checked in, he had stood in front of his door for a long time, just staring over at the old graveyard, almost as if trying to remember something. A couple of days later, before he walked uptown to start his afternoon's drinking, he crossed the road and went into the cemetery to look around. He walked slowly along Row Five, looking at the headstones, reading them silently in his mind. *George Johnson—Hanged by Mistake. Wm. Grounds—1882—Died of Wounds.*

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Seymour Dye—1882—Killed by Indians. Delia William—1881—Suicide.

He moved into Row Four. *Miles Sweeney—Murdered—1880. May Doody—1881—Diphtheria. Thos. Kearney—1882—Blown up in Mine Blast. Mrs. Stump—1884—Died in Childbirth.*

As Halloran turned up Row Three, the boy, Kit, fell in beside him. His shoeshine box was slung over his shoulder. Halloran glanced at him but said nothing.

"I could tell you about some of these dead people," Kit said. "Miner told me a lot about them. His paw told him. His paw was here in the old days."

Halloran nodded but still said nothing. He stopped at a headstone marked *John Heath.*

"This here feller was took out of the county jail and lynched," Kit said. "They hung him from a telegraph pole over by the courthouse. Miner said it stretched his neck seven inches. An' them five fellers over there—" he pointed to another grave "—was all hanged legal the next month. They was his holdup gang and he was their leader."

The man and the boy walked on.

"This here grave is Freddie Fuss, who was a little kid younger'n me," Kit said. "He died from drinking poison mine water. Real dumb. J. D. McDermott there, his horse fell on him. Crushed him flat. John King, he committed suicide. Drank stick-nine or something like that. John Beather was hanged."

They went into Row Two. Kit kept talking, but now he watched Halloran's face closely.

"Dick Toby, he was shot by Sheriff Johnny Behan. Billy Clayborne there, he was shot by Buckskin Frank Leslie. Margarita, she was a dance hall girl that got in a argument with a Mexican girl named Gold Dollar. Miner says they was fighting over a man. Gold Dollar stabbed her. Joe Wetsell over there was stoned to death by Apaches."

Now they came to a set of three graves side by side: Billy Clanton, Frank McLaury, and Tom McLaury. On each of their stones was carved: *Killed, October 26, 1881.* A taller marker standing off to the side contained all their names again and under them read: *Murdered on the streets of Tombstone, 1881.*

"Them's the men from the OK Corral gunfight," Kit said quietly.

Halloran stepped in front of the grave of Tom McLaury and stared intently at it.

"Billy Clanton was killed by the Earp brothers," Kit said. "Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan all shot him, after he shot Virgil. Frank McLaury

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was killed by Wyatt and Morgan." He moved over next to Halloran. "Tom McLaury wounded Morgan Earp. Then he was cut down by Doc Holliday."

Halloran, still staring at the grave, nodded.

"Doc was the man in the picture we showed you," Kit said. "The one you look like."

Halloran stared at the grave for what seemed like a long time. Then he patted Kit on the head and said, "Come along, boy. I'll walk you back to town."

Somehow the other card players and the people around town found out that Halloran had once been a veterinarian and they took to calling him Doc, which pleased young Kit no end. As soon as Kit found out that Halloran was not as hard and cold as he pretended to be, the boy started following him everywhere, virtually becoming his shadow.

"Don't get yourself too attached to that feller," Miner warned. "By the look of him, he's a loner clear through. One of these days he'll up and leave, then where'll you be at?"

But Kit paid the old man no heed. He was convinced in his young mind that Halloran was at the very least a distant present-day relative, and in all likelihood even more: a reincarnation of Doc Holliday.

"Where'd the boy ever get the idea that Holliday was his great-grandfather?" Halloran asked old Miner one day. Kit had gone off for a while to shine shoes, and Halloran, running into the old man on Allen Street, had invited him into Vogan's Alley Bar for a drink. "Most people I've talked to in town say Holliday never even had a wife, much less any kids."

"Folks could be right," Miner allowed. "Doc had a woman here in Tombstone name of Kate. Some say her last name was Elder, some say Fisher. Me, I don't know. But my paw, who was here when Holliday was here, told me once that there was really *two* women—both named Kate. One of them—don't know if it was Kate Elder or Kate Fisher—got shot and killed by a drunk in a saloon down in Bisbee. The other one had a baby girl and stayed around Tombstone for a spell after the Earps and Holliday moved on. She worked for Nellie Cashman in her boarding house down at 5th and Toughnut. The daughter worked there, too, when she growed up.

"I recollect when I was a boy of ten or so, seeing the daughter, whose name was Etta Holliday, serving meals over there. I even

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recollect when *she* got married and had a daughter of her own. Named her Felicity Holliday Norman. Etta's husband, Cole Norman, worked in the copper pits. Felicity went off to college somewheres around 1930 or thereabouts and married some easterner. She came back to Tombstone twice—once to bury her maw, again to bury her paw. After that, nobody ever saw or heard from her again.

"Then one day in the late fifties sometime, a gal about eighteen years old showed up here saying she was the daughter of Felicity and the granddaughter of Etta. Her name was Naomi. Said her folks had got killed in an airplane crash and she had come back to Tombstone to see if she had any relatives out here that she didn't know about. She talked to some of the older folks in town, went through a lot of records and such at the courthouse, spent a lot of time in the old library we had here then, and finally come to the conclusion that she was the great-granddaughter of John Henry Holliday. How she decided that, I don't know. Didn't nobody argue with her over it, though—if she wanted to be Doc Holliday's great-granddaughter, that was her business.

"Anyways, a while after that she took up with an Indian named Spur. Actually, he was a breed—half Chiricahua Apache, half white—had a white paw name of Safford who worked for the Army over at Fort Huachuca. Well, Naomi and Spur got hitched in some heathen Apache ceremony where they drink out of the same gourd or something and she went to live with him on the White Mountain reservation up around San Carlos. We didn't hear nothing from Naomi then 'til about seven years ago when she showed up here again with the boy. He was five at the time. His mother was sick with the consumption, and his paw, Spur, had already died of it. So Naomi took the boy to old Shepherd Man, who was Spur's great-uncle—said she didn't have nobody else to take him to. Shepherd Man agreed to look after the boy and Naomi went and sat out in the desert and died. Later on, old Shepherd man died and I—well, I kind of inherited the boy. He don't remember much about his maw, but he ain't never forgot that she told him she was the great-granddaughter of Doc Holliday. Course, that would make Kit the *great*-great-grandson, but he just says he's the great-grandson and lets it go at that. When a kid ain't got nobody of his own blood, one generation more or less don't make no difference to him."

Halloran nodded thoughtfully. "And now he thinks I'm Holliday reincarnated."

Old Miner shrugged. "Well, you got to admit you do look a whole

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lot like his picture. And you're a Southerner like he was. Got the same *initials* he had: J.H.H. And folks have taken to calling you Doc 'cause you was once a vet. You're a heavy drinker like Doc was and you're a card player like he was. All that's a powerful lot of coincidence for a twelve-year-old boy to swallow."

"What about you?" Halloran asked. "Do you swallow it?"

"I ain't saying I do, and I ain't saying I don't," Miner hedged. "I'm just interested in what's good for the boy."

"Well, I'm afraid that's not me, my friend," Halloran said easily. "I'm in Tombstone for a reason, and I won't be staying much longer."

"Don't suppose you can tell me what that reason is?"

Halloran thought about it for a moment, then said, "Why not?" He stared at the old man. "I'm waiting to kill a man," he told him.

The three Espy brothers arrived in Tombstone a week later. Halloran saw them drive up to the Lookout and check in. He waited until they were in their rooms, then went to see them. Victor Espy, the eldest, opened the door for him.

"Hello, Victor," said Halloran.

"Hello, James. Come in."

Walt, the middle brother, and Martin, the youngest, rose to greet him and shake hands.

"We wondered if you'd be here," Walt Espy said.

"I've been here for a month," Halloran told them. "Waiting."

"Well, your waiting is over," Victor said. "Get the map out, Martin."

Martin Espy spread a map on the bed and the four men gathered around it. Victor leaned over and pointed to a tiny spot in northern Mexico.

"That's the town of Magdalena. The heroin was moved up there yesterday from Guaymas, where it was taken off the boat. The Clayton brothers and Benny Clough are picking it up in Magdalena and driving north with it. They're using a four-wheel-drive Jeep, so they'll probably cross into the U.S. somewhere west of Agua Prieta. Then they'll get on Route 80 and head for Tombstone. They ought to get here around one o'clock."

"What about Tim McLain?" said Halloran. "He's the one I'm interested in."

"I was coming to him. Tim McLain and his brother Floyd are driving here from Tucson to make the pickup. We'll be waiting for

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them. When they meet the men coming up from Mexico, we'll take them all."

"I want one thing made clear," Halloran said. "Tim McLain is mine. I want him all to myself."

Walt Espy, who had always been closest of the brothers to Halloran, stepped over and put his arm around Halloran's shoulders. "We know how you feel, James. When Tim McLain held up that hospital in Phoenix to get its drug supplies, the nurse he killed was your wife. But she was also our sister. We're giving you Tim McLain because we feel it's your right to have him. But if anything goes wrong—if you find out you can't do it, or if somebody gets you first—one of us will have to step in."

"Nothing will go wrong," Halloran replied grimly. "I'll take him out, don't worry."

"Just remember," said Martin Espy, "you're to back off after you get him. We've all got badges—you haven't. One of us will take credit for killing him. Understood?"

"Understood," Halloran agreed. "Where's the meet going to be?"

"On Fremont Street just east of 3rd. It's in back of one of those Allen Street tourist attractions."

"Which one?" Halloran asked.

"The OK Corral," said Walt Espy.

Something in Halloran's chest jerked when Espy said it. But he kept tight control of himself and merely nodded.

"Behind the OK Corral. Right."

Halloran did not play cards that night. Instead, he bought a fifth of peach brandy and walked out behind the old fire station to the little adobe house where Kit and old Miner lived. Miner was in his chair, rocking, but there was no sign of Kit.

"Where's the boy?" Halloran asked, handing the old man the bag with the bottle in it.

"Uptown, I reckon. He thinks you're playing cards, so he's probably shining shoes at the Crystal Palace or the Bird Cage or one of them places."

He opened the bottle and took a long swallow, then stared curiously at his visitor. "Want anything in particular?"

"Not really. I'll be leaving tomorrow, on the one-thirty bus."

"I figured as much," Miner said.

"Oh? How'd you figure as much?"

Miner set the bottle conveniently next to his chair. "Simple. First

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I heard there was three brothers in town, all lawmen. The Espy brothers. One's a federal narcotics agent, one's a Los Angeles detective, and one's a sheriff's deputy from Phoenix. Next, I remembered what you said about being here to kill a man—and you ain't done it yet. And last, I checked my calendar and saw that tomorrow was the twenty-sixth of October. That's the anniversary of the OK Corral gunfight."

Halloran sat down on the ground, leaning back against the cool adobe of the house. "This is crazy," he said quietly.

"Sure it is," Miner said. "The Earp brothers and Holliday. The Espy brothers and Halloran. Same day. Same place. It's crazy, all right. But it's *happening*."

"Look, the Espys are friends of mine. We all served in Vietnam together. I married their only sister. The reason we're all here is—"

"Don't *matter* what the reason is," the old man interrupted. "The only thing that matters is what it looks like to Kit."

"We've got to convince him it's all coincidence," Halloran insisted.

Miner grunted loudly. "That'll be one hell of a job." He took another long swallow of brandy.

The two men sat in silence, listening to the night sounds of the desert around them. Miner passed the bottle to Halloran, who took a drink himself. The brandy was too sweet for him. He took a silver flask from his inside coat pocket and rinsed his mouth out with bourbon. "What's going to happen to the boy when you die?" he asked.

The old man shrugged. "Nothing. He can take care of hisself."

"Doesn't he have any relatives at all?"

"None nobody knows of."

Halloran sighed quietly and drank some more from his flask. "That's a tough way to grow up."

"Like I said, he can take care of hisself."

"Sure."

After a while, Halloran got up from the ground and dusted off his trousers.

"So long, old timer," he said.

"*Adios*," said Miner. As Halloran walked off into the shadows, Miner called out, "Good luck tomorrow—Doc!"

He heard Halloran chuckle softly in the darkness.

The Espy brothers parked their car at Swift's Chevron Station, which was down Fremont Street from the rear of the OK Corral

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tourist attraction. Halloran, who rode up with them from the motel, had his suitcase packed and in the back seat.

"We'll leave the car unlocked so you can get your bag after it's over," Walt Espy said. "You get out of town as quickly as you can. We'll have to stick around and help the local law make out reports. You have a gun?"

Halloran pulled back one side of his coat to reveal a .45 Colt automatic stuck in his belt.

"Here," Victor Espy said, handing him a sawed-off shotgun, "you use this. We want to make sure this gets done right."

Halloran took the ugly little shotgun and slipped it under his coat.

"All right, let's go," said Victor Espy.

The four men started down Fremont Street, two abreast: Victor and Martin Espy in front, Halloran and Walt Espy just behind them. When they got to the corner of 3rd Street, they stepped behind a fence and waited, not talking, not even moving, just watching, waiting—still, silent, solemn.

The Jeep got there first, dust-covered from its overland trip across the border. There were three men in it, equally dusty. They parked just up the street on Fremont, at the rear entrance to the OK Corral.

"That's Ira Clayton driving," Victor Espy said quietly. "His brother Bobby Clayton is next to him. Benny Clough's in the back."

As he was speaking, a white Cadillac came slowly down Fremont from the opposite direction and parked across from the Jeep.

"The McLain brothers," Walt Espy said, laying a hand on Halloran's shoulder. Two men got out of the Cadillac and crossed the street.

"Which one is Tim McLain?" Halloran asked.

"The tall one in the white shirt," Walt told him.

The men in the Jeep got out to meet the McLain brothers as they crossed the street.

Behind the fence, Victor Espy turned to his younger brothers and Halloran. "With the exception of Bobby Clayton, these men all have long criminal records. If they're taken, they face long terms in prison—and they know it. Add to it that they've got maybe a hundred thousand dollars' worth of heroin in that Jeep and I'd say we've got a fight on our hands. Don't give them an inch, understand?"

Martin and Walt Espy nodded. Halloran just stared boldly down the street at Tim McLain, as if afraid he might disappear.

"All right, let's go," Victor Espy said for the second time.

The four men stepped from behind the fence and started down

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Fremont, spreading out in a line, four abreast. It was only a moment before the five men standing between the Jeep and the Cadillac saw them.

"You men are under arrest!" Victor Espy shouted. "Put up your hands!"

Four of the drug-smugglers drew guns. The Espy brothers drew also. Benny Clough fired three quick shots at Victor Espy, then broke and ran down Fremont. Bobby Clayton and Floyd McLain both began firing at Walt Espy. Walt calmly aimed at Floyd and put a bullet in his stomach. Tim McLain had ducked behind the jeep and was firing at Martin Espy and Halloran. Ira Clayton, who was unarmed, stood with mouth agape until he saw Floyd McLain double up and pitch to the ground, then he ran up to Walt Espy, pleading, "Don't shoot me, man! I don't have no gun!" Walt threw him roughly aside and Ira ran down the way Benny Clough had run.

Tim McLain, meanwhile, fired and hit Martin Espy, who was spun around by the slug entering his shoulder and slammed to the ground. In the center of the street, Bobby Clayton, the youngest of the smugglers and the one Victor Espy said had the least criminal record, was still firing, although he had been shot once by Victor and once by Walt. His right arm had been shattered by Victor's bullet and he had switched his gun to his left hand.

Floyd McLain lay writhing in the street, blood spreading over his shirt. Halloran, slipping the shotgun from under his coat, calmly stepped around him, looking for a clean shot at his brother Tim. Bobby Clayton, shooting lefthanded, blew a hole in Victor Espy's thigh, dropping him in a heap. Clayton staggered toward the fallen lawman to finish him, but Martin Espy, lying nearby, pushed himself up and shot Clayton dead-center in the chest.

Walt Espy was pursuing Tim McLain around the Jeep, trying to force him out into the open for Halloran. McLain, in an effort to get away from Walt, ran from cover and started toward the Cadillac, running right into the waiting Halloran. Halloran let him have both barrels of the sawed-off.

"All right, get going!" Walt shouted at Halloran.

Halloran tossed the shotgun on the ground and started backing away. Bobby Clayton, miraculously still alive, fired a final shot at Walt Espy. The lawman shot him one more time and he fell, still at last. As Halloran moved away from the center of the scene, Floyd McLain rolled over on the ground and aimed his gun at him.

"You—killed—my brother—"

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Without even pausing, Halloran drew his own .45 and shot him in the heart. Martin Espy, lying nearby, fired the same time, drilling McLain in the forehead. That was the last shot fired.

The street fight was over. It had lasted less than one minute.

Halloran shoved the .45 back under his belt and walked quickly away. He went directly down to the Shell station and got his suitcase out of the car. Then he walked up to Allen Street where the afternoon bus to Lordsburg stopped.

Kit came over to the bus to tell him goodbye.

"Lots of shooting down at the OK Corral," the boy said.

Halloran nodded.

"I know you're all right, though," Kit said. "I don't even have to ask. Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday were the only two who walked away from the gunfight. 'Cept for those cowards that run, of course."

Halloran smiled. "You never give up, do you, boy?"

"Not when I know I'm right," Kit said solemnly. He put a hand on Halloran's arm. "You've just *got* to be him, mister. There's too many things that are the same."

"But there's one thing that's not the same," Halloran told him. "I've been asking around and I've found out a few things. I found out that Doc Holliday had tuberculosis. Did you know that?"

"Sure," the boy admitted. "That's what he died of."

"I found out something about Apache beliefs, too. Shepherd Man must have told you that if a man comes back to get the spirit he left behind, he'll die the same way a second time—that's the price he has to pay to come back. So I can't be Doc's reincarnation, because I'm not sick like Doc was. I don't have tuberculosis."

Kit frowned at this new bit of logic. His young face became puzzled, then disturbed. He hardly even noticed that the Lordsburg bus had pulled up and stopped in front of them.

"Sorry, boy," Halloran said, patting Kit on the shoulder. He picked up his bag and climbed aboard the bus.

As the bus pulled away, Halloran looked back at the forlorn half-breed boy and shook his head. All those damned coincidences, he thought. But that was all they were. Just coincidences.

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a *NEW* Baytown story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

The sound was higher than a tenor and clearer than a soprano. Devoid of vibrato, it was like a shaft of moonlight through a cathedral window. Gertie O'Shea's heart stood still . . .

No one in the genre, Ellery Queen once said, writes about music better than William Bankier. In this story he does that and some other things he is notably good at—assembling a wonderful cast of characters (and in this case we do mean characters) and expressing a deep affection for places as well as for people. A valentine of a story we probably should have saved for our February issue, but we couldn't wait . . .

GUNFIGHT AT THE O'SHEA CHORALE

by ***WILLIAM BANKIER***

"She did it to me again," Gertie O'Shea said, coming into the kitchen from the rehearsal hall and tossing her folder of music on the table, where her husband sat stringing a guitar and waiting for his coffee to cool.

"Beverly Luxton?" Griff O'Shea said. He knew it was Luxton. Only the bell-voiced soloist of the O'Shea Chorale could get so far up Gertie's nose.

Gertie took up Griff's coffee and drank half of it. In her late forties, she was built like a jockey and had the stance of a good bantamweight. Her blonde perm recalled the mute Marx Brother. Her miniskirt and boots were from the era of Mary Quant.

"It never fails. She waits until the rehearsal has started and then she telephones. Sorry, bad throat. Sorry, the washer overflowed.

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Sorry, I've got extra papers to mark." Gertie set down Griff's mug, empty. "Feel like a coffee?"

"I did, yes." Griffith O'Shea was handsome, bearded, and overweight. Once upon a time he was Griffith Gorman. Years ago, when he fled Montreal and hid in Baytown, it made sense for him to marry Gertie and assume her name. For one thing, the Gertrude O'Shea School of Music was long established at No. 1 Footbridge Lane, the name synonymous with singing, tap-dancing, elocution, and deportment. The other reason Griff was happy to adopt the alias was because he owed money to so many Montrealers his persona had ceased to be grata.

Escaping to Baytown, Griff brought with him his ability to play any musical instrument. He was a one-man band. In fact, he had earned many a capful of quarters keeping bass drum, cymbals, guitar, and harmonica all going at once on busy pavements along Ste. Catherine Street. At the O'Shea School, he gave lessons on anything from bugle to zither. Now, as his wife poured two fresh coffees, Griff said: "I don't know why you tolerate Bev Luxton. I'd tell her to take a hike."

"I can't. She's the best singer in the chorale. The rest of them are crows compared to her. She's only a pain when she's playing hard to get. When she sings, she's an angel."

"Can't you replace her?"

"In Baytown?"

"Then you're stuck with her."

"Some nights," Gertie mused grimly, "I feel like taking her out onto the parking lot and beating the stuffing out of her and throwing her into the river."

"I'll help you."

"She's safe and she knows it. With the Kiwanis Karnival coming up next month and us programmed to do three numbers."

"What you need," Griff said, "is for a stranger to ride into town, tie up his horse to the footbridge railing, and start singing with full-throated ease."

"Not *his* horse, *her* horse. I've got tenors. I need a soprano."

The front doorbell chimed. Griff left the kitchen, crossed the darkened rehearsal hall, and opened the door. The visitor had retreated to the footbridge entrance, dark river below, twin lines of streetlamps arching behind him to the grimy brick backs of the Front Street shops.

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"What a pleasing setting," he said. "How fortunate you are to live here." His accent was English.

Inside, with coffee in front of him, he was revealed as a twenty-five-year-old six-footer with a cameo face, an expensive suit, and the name of Desmond Smaile. "I'm a newcomer, as you've probably gathered," he said. "Born in Durham, grew up in London, been in Canada only three weeks, the last four days in Baytown. I like it here and I'm thinking of staying. I like to sing and they tell me at the *Baytown Banner,* where I've just become employed, that yours is the best choir around."

The late-night audition of Desmond Smaile took place there and then. Griff led the way to the rehearsal-hall piano and asked what their visitor would like to sing. "My repertoire is not large," Smaile said. "Do you know 'Who Is Sylvia?' " Griff knew enough to fake it, and after some introductory chords the Englishman began to sing the famous Shakespeare lyric. And Gertie O'Shea's heart stood still.

The sound being produced by Desmond Smaile was higher than a tenor and clearer than a soprano. Devoid of vibrato, it was like a shaft of moonlight through a cathedral window. When the song ended she said quietly: "Bless my soul, a counter tenor."

"Yes, I hope it's all right. I know you don't run into them much on this side of the Atlantic. But in England, some of us boy sopranos continue to produce this falsetto sound—anyway, it's the way I sing."

"Mr. Smaile," Gertie said, and Griff joined her in the heartfelt response, "you go right on singing that way."

At the next rehearsal of the O'Shea Chorale, Beverly Luxton arrived holding a tissue to her lips and surrounded by the pungent odor of menthol. "Forgive me, Gertie," she whispered, "my throat is acting up. I've been to the pharmacy to see Sylvester Cartwright and he's given me something for the symptoms."

"Poor thing."

"I'll wheeze along in the choruses but I'm afraid I can't do my solo parts tonight." Beverly smiled her brave, tubercular smile. She was tall and dark, with the robust good health of a dairymaid. She taught a class of ten-year-olds at Pine Street School, maintaining discipline through love and fear. But she liked to pretend she was frail. "Sorry," kaff, wheeze.

"I wouldn't dream of putting a strain on you." Gertie turned to the singers assembled in curved rows of collapsible chairs in the

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rehearsal hall. "All right, everybody, let's begin. Kiwanis Karnival is only a month away, so concentrate, please. First we'll do 'Where E'er You Walk.' And the solo part—Mr. Smaile, would you try it, please?"

There was a craning of necks as curious choristers turned to see the stranger to whom Gertie O'Shea had just assigned one of Beverly Luxton's solos. When he began to sing, it was all they could do to sustain their own parts at first. Then they responded to the crystal-clear voice that lifted them up and drew them along to a far, far better performance than they had ever done.

Beverly Luxton excused herself and went home early, snuffling into the night and letting the door slam behind her. This Snail or Quail or whoever he was was going to be a problem. He was a good singer, that was for sure. But who was he? Where did he come from? He was alien all the way from his elegant suit and the cut of his silky hair to that incredible voice that reminded Bev of a silver cornet in a Salvation Army band. How come he had suddenly popped up in Baytown to interfere with her well ordered life?

Beverly would not have ordered her life any other way had she been handed a menu. True, she was twenty-eight years old and she lived alone, but that was by choice. It was not the usual thing for a Baytown girl to move out of the house unless she was getting married, but Beverly was not your usual girl. Mum and Dad were on her side and she could afford her own place, so good luck to her. As for proposals of marriage, there had been enough of these and all of them suitably unsuitable that she felt confirmed in her single status.

But here was a threat. Her role as soprano soloist in the O'Shea Chorale was important to Beverly, and had been taken for granted since high school graduation. No smooth-voiced interloper was going to drift into town and knock Bev Luxton off her perch. Not without a fight.

Step one was to discover all she could about Desmond Smaile. That meant having coffee with the young proprietor of Cartwright's Pharmacy, so Beverly went there after school the next afternoon. They sat at the counter and she probed Sylvester Cartwright, pharmacist, amateur magician, and town gossip. After high school, when a number of boys opted for medicine at Queen's University, Sylvester took the quicker, easier road to becoming a druggist. Magic was his hobby. Not real legerdemain but a hokey, hilarious sort of act in

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which he stumbled about the stage, breaking his props, in a constant state of terror and surprise. The audience loved it and "The Great Sylvestro" appeared at all town functions, including the Kiwanis Karnival.

Cartwright was a natural gossip. He had always got on with women—they told him everything. Men liked him for his readiness to take a joke as well as to perform one. He sat now at the marble counter in his white jacket with the high collar buttoned at one side. It gave him an innocent appearance that was not misleading. Round face, button eyes behind glasses with thick rims, short black hair combed flat with a wide-toothed comb, Cartwright raised and lowered his coffee mug as he recited his dossier on Desmond Smaile.

"He answered an ad and came to work for the *Banner,* selling space. He never did it before, apparently, but his accent and appearance make it easy for him. He's English all right—came over a few weeks ago, spent some time in Montreal, then wandered down here."

"Where do you get all this?"

"I ask. The staff from the newspaper come in here, too."

"What's he doing here, anyway? How many people do you know of who come to Baytown from another city, let alone a foreign country?"

"I'm with you." Sylvester looked puzzled, as if the rabbit in the hat had appeared as a rubber chicken. "Whoever that man left behind," the magician theorized, "is wondering where the hell he's got to."

This was the incentive Beverly required. She would get close to the mysterious singer, this tenor without a past, and she would probe until she turned up the information. It would be incriminating, she was convinced of that. And then she would use it against him—not in any vicious way, but just to persuade him to move along. Let him take his pear-shaped tones to Vancouver or points west and leave the O'Shea Chorale to its soloist in residence.

Beverly said goodbye to Sylvester Cartwright and hurried down Front Street to where the *Baytown Banner* editorial offices shared a building with the Coronet Hotel. She inquired after Mr. Smaile and was directed to an office at the end of a lopsided corridor. She knocked once and entered a cubbyhole packed with a desk, a chair, a filing cabinet, and a telephone. Dim light seeped through a window last washed just before it left the glazier's. Smaile was on the telephone. He looked at his visitor but did not see her.

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"If I may say so with respect, Mr. Little," he intoned, "I think you ought to reconsider. A firm held in such high esteem as yours must have its name in the *Banner*'s special Karnival issue. This is why I persist, sir. If the issue were to appear and your company not represented, then you'd think me to have been less than conscientious for not persuading you to take part. So I come back at you once again, sir. Yes? A quarter page is only two hundred dollars and it qualifies you for a frequency discount should you choose to run the ad again in the next thirteen weeks—"

Leaning against the wall—there was no other chair—Beverly closed her eyes and almost went under. The mellifluous voice was as hypnotic as a Billie Holiday blues. When the phone went down at last and he came to stand beside her, she still could not feel the ground beneath her feet.

"You're the girl from the rehearsal last night," he said. "The one who went home early."

"Beverly Luxton. Where did you learn to sell like that?"

The reference to business displeased him—his voice became abrupt. "Oh, that. Survival. One does what one must do."

The reference to survival brought Beverly back to earth. She had a career as choir soloist to protect. "I felt terrible not being able to stay last night," she said. "I wanted to come and tell you how beautifully you sang."

"Most kind of you."

Beverly felt herself back in a tiny front porch years ago, squeezed in beside a perspiring boy she had delivered home from a Sadie Hawkins dance. She began to panic. "And how about dinner?" she heard herself say.

"How about that?" Smaile agreed, opening the door and gallantly offering her the freedom of the corridor.

"Can you believe what's happening with Beverly?" Gertie O'Shea asked her husband. The little boy packing up his trombone was permitted to listen. He was only nine years old and half deafened from an hour of making harsh noises.

"What's happening?" Griff asked, pocketing a five-dollar bill. Junior students paid cash.

"She's spending all her spare time with Desmond Smaile."

"How do you know?"

"Sylvester Cartwright just rang to ask how much time he has on

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stage at the Karnival. I told him and then he got onto Bev and Des. He says they've been dining, dancing—the works."

"He must be speculating about the works."

"Does it make sense? This English character has been in town two weeks. She hated him from day one. Now here they are, thick as thieves."

"Tell you one thing," Griff said, blowing a scale on his piccolo, getting ready for the next student. "Beverly's up to something."

And she was. Convinced that Desmond Smaile was concealing some dark secret, she played the role of Mata Hari, setting up her victim to make him talk about himself. So far she had learned nothing useful. His childhood in Durham, lower middle class; his acquisition of a fine education—and the proper accent—through scholarship; his career as opening batsman with Surrey County Cricket Club—all good stuff but no reason to bring in the police.

"What baffles me," Beverly said, carrying a second bottle of wine from her apartment kitchen, "is how come an attractive man like you isn't married."

"Nobody will have me."

"Stop fishing for compliments." She refilled his glass. "There must be a lady back in London. At least one. Tell me," she said, sitting beside him with one silky leg tucked under her, "I want to know."

"That face—" he said, kissing her gently on one side of the nose she thought was too prominent. "Very Lauren Bacall. All right, there *is* a woman. And if you'll hold me close and smother my anxiety, I'll tell you all about Mercia Challenfont and her hideous father, Hugo—and why I had to get away."

The letter arrived addressed to Miss Mercia Challenfont care of Challenfont Enterprises, City of London. The anonymous correspondent apparently did not know the street address. After a second reading, Mercia perused the envelope, saw a Canadian stamp and the words PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL. It certainly was.

But why? Why had somebody in a place called Baytown taken the trouble to inform her as to the whereabouts of her escaped fiancé? Only a woman could be so vindictive. On the other hand, a man might do it if Desmond was lording it about, breaking the hearts of the local talent.

Mercia rode downstairs on the platform installed to lift her father's bulk without undue strain on the old man's heart. The machine

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moved with the speed of the Mendenhall Glacier but Mercia had always been prankish, a child in a woman's body, lover of hitchhiking, of vaulting a narrow stream on a pole, of throwing a punch when angry.

The body she inhabited was that of a peasant girl, thick in the wrists and ankles, plump of calf and of cheek. Her health was robust, her appetites were keen. She had close-cropped red hair and green eyes that could project two moods only—boredom and mischief. She was as single-minded as a hungry cat and boisterous as a victorious basketball team.

The real Mercia Challenfont was camouflaged behind that magic name and a wardrobe of clothes made for her by designers in London, Paris, and Rome. It was only after he had seen the young lady under the influence of a few tantrums that Desmond Smaile decided to vanish. Mercia was taken by surprise. All she knew was that one day Desmond was talking marriage, then he became silent for a few weeks, then he was gone.

Mercia stepped from the platform at the foot of the staircase and went in search of her father, tapping the pages of the letter against her cherry lips, blowing across their edges a buzzing rendition of the march from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. She found Hugo Challenfont in the kitchen, drinking ale from a mug the size of a chamber pot and eating a couple of pounds of Cape grapes.

"Daddy daddy daddy," she said, spreading the emphasis equally, "guess who's turned up?"

The old man's mind produced the name of a British Secret Service bloke who had gone missing decades ago while snooping around the hull of a new Italian naval vessel in a frogman's suit. "Commander Crabbe?" he volunteered.

"Daddy, you're always so stupid. No! Desmond Smaile. He's over in Canada, some little place in Ontario called Baytown."

"Who says so?" Challenfont had been glad when the Smaile character absconded, was even happy about the ten thousand pounds he had managed to steal from the company's current account. It had meant he would never be seen again and ten thousand was a reasonable price to pay for a future devoid of Desmond Smaile.

"The letter is unsigned."

"Never believe an anonymous letter. It's a hoax. Throw it away."

Mercia threaded her fingers into her father's hair and twisted the silvery blue strands until the old man roared with pain, most of it

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mock. "Daddy, you're such a liar. You always hated Desmond. I'm going to go and find him and bring him back."

"You do and I'll slap a theft charge on him. You'll end up visiting him in Wormwood Scrubs."

Mercia did not bother responding to this hollow threat. "Desmond Smaile is the handsomest man I ever went out with. Why don't you like him, Daddy?"

Challenfont couldn't admit the real reason, the fact that the arrogant young man had loved his daughter and then left her. True, Hugo had made things difficult for the prospective son-in-law while he was learning the brokerage business, had missed no opportunity to act the tyrant. But why didn't the boy fight back? The old man would have respected Smaile had he stood up and said, "I'm marrying your daughter, sir, and you can go to hell." But it was obvious the boy did not care much for Mercia. He would rather have his freedom and ten thousand pounds.

But Hugo Challenfont could say none of this to the girl sitting opposite him in a silk mother hubbard with her bare feet resting on his lap. "I'll tell you why I don't like him," he responded to his daughter's question. "I can't stand a man who sings like a bloody eunuch!"

As Desmond's voice soared through the rehearsal hall, Beverly escaped into the washroom. She felt strangely affected—not with envy as in the earlier days. It was another sensation, almost unpleasant but not quite, and she had to flee that sound. In the cubicle, she sat and smoked a cigarette—bad for her throat, but since she was doing fewer solos these days she was abandoning her regimen of voice care and training.

There had been no response yet to her letter. Perhaps it had never been delivered.

Desmond had told her enough about Mercia for Beverly to feel she knew the girl. She was headstrong, spoiled, accustomed to having her way. That was why he had cut and run—and why Beverly had persuaded herself that information as to his whereabouts would bring the wealthy English girl on the next plane. Followed by the destruction on the ground of Desmond Smaile and the return of Bev Luxton to her rightful position as soprano soloist with the O'Shea Chorale.

But nothing was happening. Beverly's glazed eyes focused through drifting smoke on words she had been staring at for some time. They

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formed a four-line verse scrawled on the painted metal door in ballpoint pen.

Here comes Gertie,
Mean and dirty,
And closer to sixty
Than she is to thirty.

Charming. Obviously the management never used this washroom. The handwriting was familiar—she had seen it somewhere recently. Scrounging through her purse, Beverly came up with a receipt written out for her by Griff O'Shea when she paid her choir fee. She held the paper near the graffito—a perfect match.

She felt sad. Griff and Gertie. All those years married and so close to each other. There was no such thing, apparently, as a perfect relationship. The mean feelings had to come out somewhere.

The couple went back to Desmond's place after rehearsal and Beverly carried her despondency with her. The apartment belonged to the newspaper and was rented out cheap to the sort of employee who came and went on notice too short to justify a decent place in a proper part of town.

"Are you all right?" Desmond asked as he prepared drinks at a bare table furnished with one bottle and two glasses.

"I'm fine," she said with assumed gaiety. She was looking down from a window at a deserted parking lot behind the hotel next door and, beyond its stone parapet, the broad darkness that was the river. There was a newspaper clipping mounted askew in a shabby frame suspended on the wall beside the window. It was front-page material from an ancient edition of the *Baytown Banner*. Beverly recalled the event from her childhood. There were men in a boat on a flooded Front Street with ice floes forcing their way through the main doors of the Coronet Hotel. The caption was headed: THE MIGHTY EDNA OVERFLOWS ITS BANKS.

"You don't sound all right to me." Desmond handed her a drink.

"I've done a terrible thing." Beverly sipped her whisky. The confession was on her lips and there was no way she could take it back. She spilled the whole thing—her jealousy of his singing, her resentment of losing her position with the O'Shea Chorale, her campaign to discover some damaging secret from his past, and finally, her letter to Mercia designed to lead to his departure from Baytown. "But I don't want you to go now," she wailed. "I love you, Des. I don't care about the solos, we can sing duets, I want you to stay."

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They embraced and her panic was dispelled. "I'm not going anywhere. But one thing is beyond dispute." He was looking at the picture of the flooded street and the ice floes. "If Mercia comes here and checks into the Coronet, we'll have a job and a half getting her out again."

"She can't come tomorrow," Beverly said. "It's Saturday, the day of the Kiwanis Karnival." That meant field events all afternoon on the Baytown High School campus with a tea table and a bar under a marquee. In the evening, the Chorale was to appear as part of the stage show in the auditorium. This would be followed by dancing in the gymnasium to the local swing band, the Serenaders, playing stock arrangements of Dorsey, Goodman, and Brown. "Nothing can stop the Karnival."

But the Fates, with their keen sense of the dramatic, chose just that Saturday to have Mercia Challenfont arrive at noon in a hired car, having flown in to Montreal hours before. She barged through the brass-plated hotel doors with such presence that the manager altered his reservation list and assigned her room 212, the one with the good mattress.

By asking questions, Mercia discovered the whereabouts that day of Desmond Smaile. At one-thirty, she telephoned him at the school, where he was rehearsing with the choir. Beverly came with him to the Principal's office to hear him take his call. The moment he was paged, she had known the worst had happened. He confirmed her fears when he put down the phone.

"She's here. Registered at the hotel. Wants to see me."

"Don't go there," Beverly pleaded. "You'll never come back."

"I have to go. If there's ever going to be a peaceful life for you and me, I have to face her."

Beverly played her last card. "If you go to that hotel, don't expect me to be here when you get back." It seemed a good line when used by movie heroines. But after he hurried out of the office and she heard his footsteps echo down the corridor and out of the school, she saw the weakness of it. "Where am I supposed to go?" was her futile plea.

In Mercia's room at the Coronet Hotel, Desmond Smaile did as he was told. He sat on the edge of the bed and listened to what she had to say. The firmness of the mattress surprised him; clapped-out hotels like this one usually had shattered mattresses.

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"You look wonderful, Des. I've missed you beyond telling. I've forgotten how much tonic you take in your gin."

"Just a splash."

She brought the drink and sat down beside him. Her hand rested on his thigh. Given a damp cloth, she could have pressed his trousers without an iron. "I'll never forgive you for running away from me. But I've found you now and I'm not letting you escape again."

"It's nice to be wanted, my dear. But I'm not coming back to London."

"You must be joking. I've been in this town for three hours and I'm bored already."

"It's not the same for me. I have a job. I've joined a choral society." Desmond took a drink. "I've made friends."

Monica stiffened, her voice hardened. "There's another woman."

"Yes, but it's more than that. I've got a new life here."

Mercia got up and went to the dresser. She opened her handbag and took out a revolver. Facing Desmond, holding the gun firmly, she said: "Don't blame me, then, if somebody gets hurt."

"I won't let you harm Beverly." Desmond put his drink aside and stood up.

"Is that her name?" Mercia said in the cultured tones grafted onto her by the school that provides BBC radio with an unending supply of plummy-voiced newscasters. "I may not shoot her—I may do you right now and have done with it."

"You can't shoot me, Mercia." They both knew she could.

"Why on earth not?"

"Because I have to sing 'Roses of Picardy' at the Kiwanis Karnival tonight."

It was such a preposterous excuse that she let him go. But she promised to be in the audience, ready to claim him when the performance was over—at gunpoint if necessary.

Back at the school, helping to decorate the stage in the auditorium, Desmond told Beverly about his dangerous interview. "She's a woman scorned," he concluded.

Beverly was reconnoitering the problem for a way out. "Is the gun real?"

"Indeed. Mercia comes from a wealthy English family—they grow up with guns. They kill animals the way you play dominoes."

Beverly leaned against the cabinet used by Sylvester Cartwright in his hilariously abortive attempt to saw a woman in half. "Then there's only one thing to do. We'll have to call in the police."

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"We can't. There's something I haven't told you." He went on to explain how, before he fled London and the employ of Hugo Challenfont, he had stolen ten thousand pounds from company funds. It was partly traveling and setting-up money, partly insurance to guarantee the family could never take him back. "Failing all else, Mercia may blow the whistle. They'd extradite me. I'd never see the green, green grass of Baytown again."

Beverly was thinking. "Then the police are out. But there must be another way." She was staring at Sylvester's table of magical props when the idea came to her. "Of course! And it's so easy! Listen . . ."

More than any disc jockey, Sylvester Cartwright was unable to refuse a request. Let a friend ask him to do something and he would do it. He might do it even if a friend didn't ask him. So when Beverly Luxton took him aside before he went onstage to do his act, he listened quietly, nodding his head. When she finished her briefing, Bev called to Desmond, "Take Sylvester to the peephole and show him where your friend is sitting."

Desmond did so. Sylvester spent a long time staring. When he drew back, he said thoughtfully: "She looks sort of—"

"Formidable?"

"That. But something else, too. I don't know—"

"Will you help us?"

"I'll help you, I'll help you."

After four hours at games on campus in hazy sunshine that afternoon, the Baytowners were in a mood to be entertained. They responded to the first set of numbers by the O'Shea Chorale. They were receptive to a couple of renderings on the musical saw by a member of the town council billed as "the only man who can play 'Trees' and cut them down at the same time." And when the Great Sylvestro was announced, there was quick applause followed by an expectant hush as the curtains opened to reveal a rickety table piled with the tools of the magician's trade. His timing was superb. In the wings, Sylvester gave the audience about fifteen seconds to gaze at this forlorn table while nothing happened. Then, just as the nervous giggles began, he yanked on a thread attached to the front left leg, the table collapsed with boxes, rabbits, bells, and balloons scattering everywhere, and this was his entrance. The Great Sylvestro, improperly prepared, a loser who could only win in a contest to choose the worst loser, was going into his act.

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He fanned cards—they littered the floor. He palmed a coin—it rolled off the stage into the pit. Sylvester cracked eggs and poured milk into a top hat, stirred it with his magic wand and presto!—out came a glutinous mess of uncooked omelet. Checking his wrist for the time, he drew the metal strip from what was, in fact, a tape measure. "Hmmmm," he said, "nine inches after eight."

Scanning the hall, the magician announced: "I need a volunteer. You. Yes, you—the young lady with the dramatic hair." As Mercia Challenfont approached the steps at the side of the stage, he went on: "The Great Sylvestro reads minds. I'm getting the word 'Bobby.' You have a husband named Bobby. No, it's a London bobby—a policeman. You are from London."

Beside him now, she confirmed this fact and the crowd applauded their pharmacist's transparent achievement. "Have we ever seen each other before?"

"No, but I'm glad we have now," Mercia said. "You're cute."

This statement, combining boldness and sincerity, knocked The Great Sylvestro off stride. For a moment he fell out of character, became himself, stuttered and turned noticeably pink. Louts in the audience whistled. Mercia loved it.

"And now for my piece of resistance," Sylvester said, mastering himself with effort. "The famous set-fire-to-the-purse trick. May I have your purse, please. Back home, you call it a handbag."

Mercia passed it over, a large burgundy-leather creation with more pockets than a regiment of Guards. Sylvester took it, raised it over his head like a pagan offering, held it behind his back, and it fell onto the stage. "Sorry about that," he said. Bending to pick it up, he kicked it against the hem of the curtain. Waiting hands snatched it out of sight, to the delight of the watchers. Moments later, another purse was pushed forward from beneath the curtain.

Sylvester picked it up. It was a cheap cloth bag with a drawstring top, clearly so unlike the one the volunteer had given him that the trick became hilarious. He produced a metal tray, set the bag on it, and doused it with lighter fluid. He touched it off with a match, making reassuring noises to the girl beside him, then losing confidence and retreating to a book of magic—through which he leafed despairingly as the bag was reduced to a charred mound.

"I have it here!" he cried at last. "It's all in the magic words!" Raising his voice, he called out: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, come back, handbag—you must, you *must!*" With that, he back-heeled the

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tray and its contents through the curtain behind him. Back it came with Mercia's bag on it, good as new.

Had she been given time to think, the girl from London would have realized her bag seemed lighter in weight than before. But the three-piece band was playing, the crowd was applauding, this vulnerable young man was bundling her offstage, and as they parted he said something to her. He said: "I'm really sorry, dear—this wasn't my idea."

Back in her seat, Mercia thought about the cryptic apology. Why did the man say such a thing? She had her property back, no harm done. What idea was not his? The curtains opened to reveal the chorus onstage fronted by Desmond and a dark-haired girl singing "Come, come, I love you only . . ." and Mercia's investigative thinking was submerged in a blood-red tide of anger.

When the show ended, the auditorium became a gentle shoving match of bemused people all in a hurry to get where they were going. Mercia had decided by this time to take the situation in hand. She stopped somebody and put her question: "Could you please tell me how to get backstage?"

The members of the O'Shea Chorale never attended the public functions that followed their appearances. Instead they returned to the rehearsal hall at No. 1 Footbridge Lane, where there was food and drink laid on and there was space and music for dancing. This elitist practice was Gertrude O'Shea's idea. Gertie had always believed she was one of the brightest and best from the day she went alone as a teenager on the train to Toronto, found her way to a CBC radio studio, auditioned for and later won the competition known as "Opportunity Knocks." Nobody from Baytown had ever done that before.

Now she stood at the front window with many of her current flock and watched her husband ignite the ceremonial skyrockets. Griff always marked a choral success by sending up three bright rockets from the center of the bridge. As their starbursts lit up the sky, Desmond brought Beverly a drink. "The duet worked," he said.

Her mind was somewhere else. "She'll retaliate, won't she? When she discovers the gun is gone."

"Don't worry about Mercia Challenfont."

"She's come all this way to get you. Taking that gun isn't going to stop her."

"I'll go to the hotel tomorrow," Desmond said. "I'll talk sense to

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her. She'll go back to England and leave us alone." He took Bev's glass and set it down beside his own. "Let's dance."

"Lord help me," Bev said as she put her head on his shoulder, "I remember when Baytown used to be a peaceful place."

It was hours later and most of the choristers had gone home when rifle fire began outside the O'Shea Chorale. Griff switched off the record player. Gertie turned off the overhead light. They and the only dancing couple left, Desmond and Beverly, crouched at the window, looking out into the parking lot.

"What is it?" Gertie asked.

"Somebody took a pot-shot from behind that car."

A cultured female voice rang through the darkness. "Come on out, Desmond! We know you're in there!"

"Mercia Challenfont," Beverly said.

"No," Griff corrected her. "It's a Ford Capri."

Desmond took from his pocket the pistol he had stolen from Mercia's handbag during the magic trick. Beverly saw it. "You can't use that!"

"Maybe just to scare her off—"

The popping sound was heard again. Something whizzed through the open window, struck the back of a chair, and rattled on the floor. Griff groped and found it. "Just as I thought," he said. "BB shot." He began to snicker.

"It's no laughing matter," Beverly snapped. "They could put somebody's eye out."

In the darkness, Mercia was having doubts about the effectiveness of the rifle. "Are you sure this thing is dangerous?"

Sylvester Cartwright was pouring from a thermos jug into a plastic cup. "My mother always said it could put somebody's eye out." He passed the cup to the girl beside him. Her power had mesmerized him from the start. When she came backstage and lit into him for his part in the theft, he heard few words but felt every wave of her personality. When she seized him by the arm and forced him to leave the school and drive to his house, he hoped she would never let go. She was demanding a replacement weapon and his old BB rifle was all he could offer.

He spent an hour pretending to look for it while he fed her drinks. What a difference she made to his sitting room—he kept looking in on her, catching her from various angles, surprising himself. By the

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time they drove off for the hall she was in a calmer mood, perhaps because of the booze.

Now, hiding behind the car, he continued the alcohol therapy. "Here," he said, "drink your vodka and orange."

"I wish they hadn't turned the light out," Mercia mumbled. "I can't see the window."

Sylvester put his head close because he was enjoying her fragrance. "You must really hate Desmond Smaile."

"Hate him? The bastard stole my father's money, thousands and thousands. Used it to run away. Left me at the altar. —Well, near enough. Nobody does that to Mercia Challenfont." She cocked the rifle and sent another pellet to rattle off clapboard. "No, not hate. Resentment is more like it. How bloody dare he!"

Maybe it was the vodka. Something was bringing up from deep inside Sylvester Cartwright a sense of adventure he usually experienced only on stage. Maybe it was this woman. "I'm glad it's only resentment," he said. "Hate is the other side of love. If you had feelings that strong about Desmond, I wouldn't like it."

Mercia's response was a kiss delivered with fair accuracy under difficult conditions. "Portable bar," she said. "A gun you don't mind lending. What's a prince like you doing in a diabolical little town like this?"

"I've got an idea," Sylvester said. "Everything's going to be all right." He drank a cup of courage and stood up. "Keep me covered."

The parking lot was deserted. No light showed inside the O'Shea Chorale. Cartwright planted his feet and tried to keep his balance. A gust of wind sent a tumbleweed of crumpled newspaper scuttling across the pavement. On the other side of the bridge, a horse whinnied in the stables of Baytown Pony Rental. "Hey, inside the house!" he called. "I'm coming in!"

Behind him, the rifle popped. He felt a pellet strike the back of his leather jacket and drop to the ground. Mercia's whisper was apologetic. "Sorry!"

Sylvester approached the screen doors in character, pace measured, hands held a few inches from his thighs. His boots clumped on the porch floor. He repeated his announcement: "I'm coming in!" Then, using both hands to fling open the pair of doors, he strode into the rehearsal hall.

People mobbed him. Out of the babble of hoarse questions he selected that of Gertie O'Shea, who asked: "What the hell is going on out there?"

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"I'll explain later. Everything's going to be okay. Just do as I tell you. Have you got that gun you stole from Mercia's purse?"

"I'm holding it," Desmond said.

"Is it loaded?"

"Afraid so."

"Good. Where do you want the bullet, Gertie—in your ceiling or in your floor?"

Outside, behind the parked car, Mercia Challenfont was becoming restless. She poured some more vodka and orange. This was all most unusual to say the least—squatting on damp pavement on a chilly evening, no supper, not a friend in sight, her own gun probably aiming at her at this very moment. But being an upper-class Englishwoman, she was accustomed to discomfort. Her father's house—centuries old, worth millions—had worse plumbing than the average motel. She was enjoying herself thoroughly.

End of the vodka. Perhaps Sylvester had more at home. What an interesting fellow—a wild man on stage yet such a governable child in the relationship they had established.

A shot rang out. Mercia's head came up and she stared at the drab building across the yard. The screen doors burst open and Sylvester Cartwright stumbled out backward, took three steps across the wooden porch, then fell spread-eagled on the pavement.

"Sylvester!" Mercia dropped the rifle and ran to his side. She arrived at the same time as the party from the house but she might have been alone as she knelt beside the fallen man. "I never wanted this," she moaned.

"It had to happen," Sylvester croaked. "It was the only way."

"Don't try to talk." She cradled his head.

"I must. You've got to hear this—" Sylvester coughed hoarsely.

"Get water," Gertie improvised and Griff hurried inside.

"I'm glad it happened, Mercia—because now at least we've met."

"I'm glad, too. You're the sweetest man ever." She looked up. "You can keep Desmond Smaile, whoever you are. You're welcome to him, and all the misery that goes with him."

Desmond and Beverly, holding their breath, looked down at the prostrate chemist. He spoke again. "Say you love me, Mercia."

"I do. I love you, Sylvester."

"After so little time?"

"What does time matter?"

"I'm afraid it matters quite a lot." Sylvester got to his feet smartly

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and brushed himself off. "I have to open the store at nine o'clock. We'd better get going."

"You beast!" Mercia gasped. "You aren't even hurt!"

"Yes, I am. When Desmond fired that shot into the ceiling and I lost my balance and fell on the ground, I gave my back a heck of a jolt."

"I'll show you what a jolt really is." Mercia began pursuing Sylvester around the parking lot and had yet to catch him when the police car pulled in, blue light flashing.

The officer who got out was a patient man. "Have a heart, Gertie," he said. "We can put up with sky rockets off the bridge when it isn't even the Queen's birthday. But gunfire in the night is something else."

"Sorry," Gertie said. "We need a gun shot in our next concert. We were singing 'Pistol Packin' Momma.' It was only a sound effect."

"What's this, then?" The other officer, prowling the darkness, came back with the BB rifle.

"That's mine," Sylvester said.

"We'll be using it onstage for a prop," Gertie adlibbed. "For presenting arms when the flags come on."

"Be careful," the officer said. "You could put somebody's eye out with that."

Weeks later, when a bright-eyed Sylvester Cartwright announced he was going to sell his pharmacy and move to England, his friends were astounded.

"This is your home town," Gertie said. "You're thirty-two years old. How can you do such a thing?"

"We know you have a crush on Mercia," Griff said, "but how can you leave Baytown?"

"That's the whole point," Sylvester said. "Baytown. There are nice people here, old friends, new ones like Desmond. I'm staying for his wedding to Beverly, but as soon as they're married, I'm off. Pleasant as it is, Baytown can drive you crazy with boredom. Nothing ever happens here."

"You're right about that," Griff said. He finished adding water to a bucketful of cement, stirred it a few more times, then pressed Mercia's revolver into the mixture as far as it would go. "Let's have a drink while that mess hardens. Then you can come with me while we sink it in the bay."

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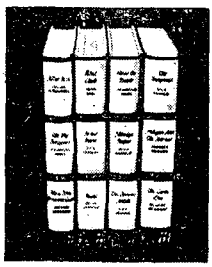

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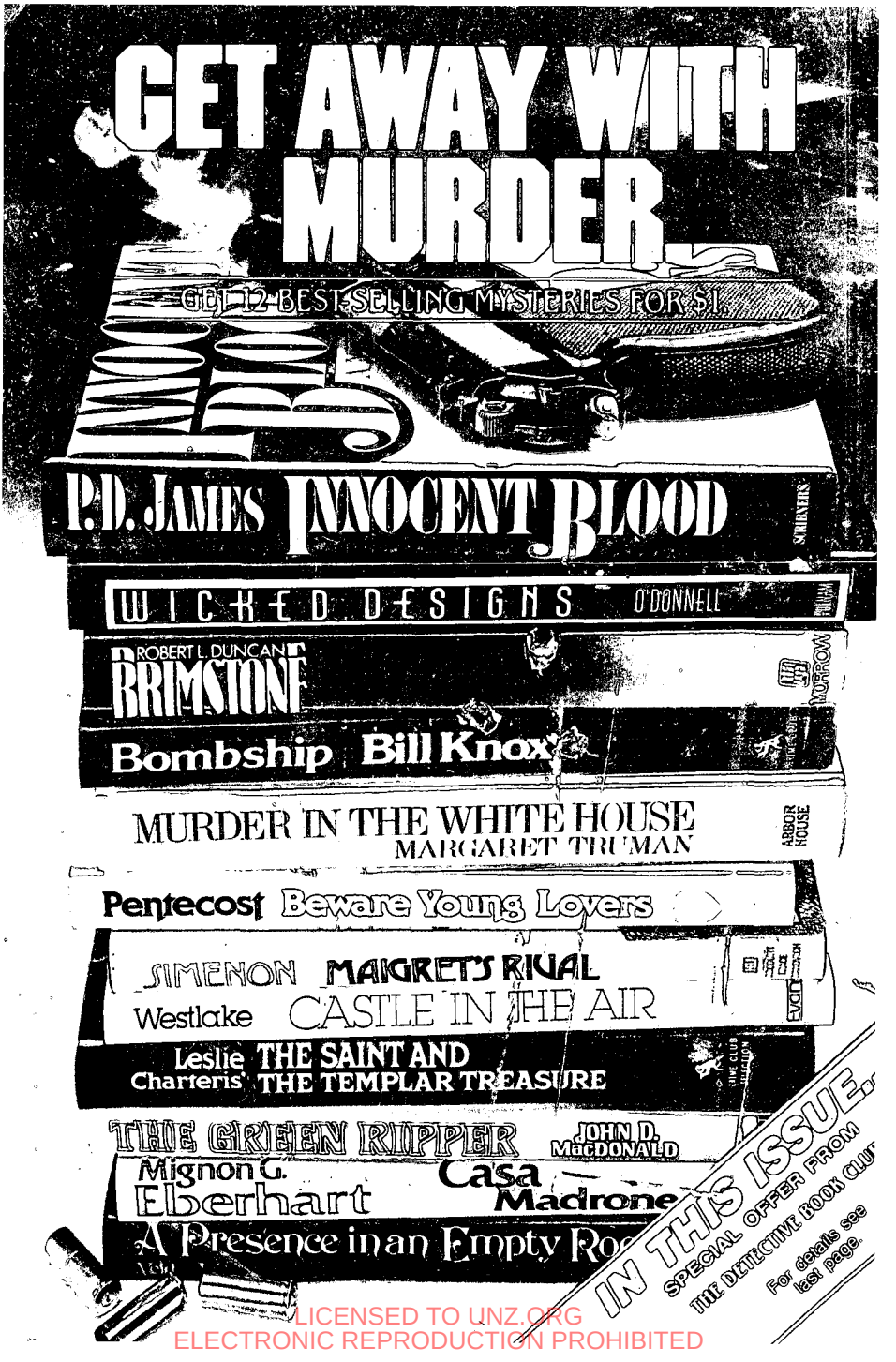

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